CLAUDE.

VOL. II.

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CLAUDE.

BY

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"HELEN'S FIRST LOVE,"

"THE HAMMONDS OF HOLYCROSS,"

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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CLAUDE.

CHAPTER I.

WE performed our railway journey home by the full, long light of a sweet spring day, almost summer then—for it was the middle of May. I had never made such an absence before from the old home, and though I was often inclined to complain of its dreariness of late, yet my heart bounded with joy at the sight of its dearly loved old walls, as we drove up late that night after our tedious long drive from the station. It was too dark without to recognize many of the landmarks as we came along in the jolting fly that brought us home; but the light

shone cheerily within from the unclosed windows, and Claude and Juliet were soon at the door, to help us out and welcome us home.

Mrs. Markham roused herself also to greet us, and I could not help thinking she looked rather more alive than when we went away.

A few days later confirmed this opinion in regard to my step-mother. She was evidently more active, and inclined to exert herself, than had been the case since the time of her husband's death.

Miss Ramsay looked on with some astonishment, not perhaps unmingled with dissatisfaction at her sister's returning vitality, when some convincing proof was exhibited two or three mornings after our return.

"Don't exert yourself, Charlotte," said Miss Ramsay, "or you will be quite knocked up by and by."

"If I had not exerted myself all the time you were away, Alethea, and had taken Marian too, what do you suppose would have

become of the house, and all the servants in it going their own way?"

So it seemed, that when Mrs. Markham found it needful, she managed to get about like other people.

"And what have *you* been doing all this time, Juliet?" I asked of my young sister.

And then it appeared from her reply, that whenever her mother did not require her help at home, all her time and energies had been devoted to parochial affairs; *that* was clearly her vocation, at least for the time being. Then I wanted to know how Claude had been amusing or employing himself during the time I I had been absent. Juliet said he had been at home every day, as in the earlier time of his engagement at Mr. Crofton's, for he would not hear of my brother's remaining at his house when his mother was nearly alone; so he came home every day to the six o'clock dinner.

"And do you like that as well, Claude?" I asked one fine evening when we went out

for a stroll, leaving Juliet busy practising some new chants, and the two sisters deeply engaged in an interesting gossip.

"Like it! In what way do you mean, Minnie?"

"Oh, having more time to yourself, of course, dear."

"I never found my duties very hard at the Hall, I think, even when I stayed there all night—as I did when you were last there, Minnie."

"Yes, what a nice time that was! Is Mr. Crofton writing anything now, Claude?"

"He is always writing something, I think; and he can manage his pen better now than he could a few weeks ago. I begin to think he will not want a secretary much longer, Marian."

"Not want *you*, Claude?" I exclaimed in dismay, for we had all considered the appointment as a permanent one. "Has Mr. Crofton said anything of the kind to you, Claude?"

"No," was the reply.

"Then what makes you think so, Claude?"

Claude made no answer for some time, and began to whistle as if that part of our discourse were ended; then I asked,

"And how are Miss Crofton and Flora, Claude?"

"Much as usual, I believe," he answered carelessly, adding, "Of course I don't see so much of them now; but everything seems much the same as when you went away. I dare say you will soon be seeing some of them to answer for themselves."

The next morning, which was nearly a week after our return, Mr. Crofton came over with his sister and daughter; they had certainly been in no hurry to welcome us back, or hear any tidings Miss Ramsay might have to impart concerning the late and the present Lord Ramsay.

There was no occasion to ask any questions on the subject, as during the whole course of the visit, Miss Alethea's conversation ran on no other. I could see there was a certain

constraint in the manner in which Mr. Crofton and his sister received the tidings she imparted; they had apparently no wish to enlarge upon the topic she had chosen. She no doubt thought it must be a very interesting one to everyone present, and she wound up by telling them her nephew was to start the next week for Switzerland with Lady Percival, but he did not intend remaining there long, she believed; he was going to make a tour, and would be absent possibly some months.

I could not gather from Flora's words or manner whether she felt any particular interest in Miss Ramsay's communications. She certainly listened, and when we all set off to walk part of the way back, she remarked to Claude, who happened to be hovering near, having come home earlier than usual that afternoon,

"I think, Mr. Markham, I shall have to pack up poor Tip and send him on a tour, beginning at Switzerland. What do you think?"

I was startled at the coolness of the young girl, and looked and listened eagerly for my brother's reply; it was given in a very indifferent tone,

"I think, if you ask my advice, you had better keep him till he is sent for."

"You don't think he is wanted," with a little low laugh.

There was no reply; Claude kept near, however, switching the long grass with his riding whip.

"Eh?" asked Flora, suddenly turning the full light of her laughing mischievous eyes upon him, "you think so, don't you?"

"I never pretend to know who or what *is* wanted," returned Claude more impulsively.

"Which shows you want discernment," returned the young lady composedly.

I saw my brother cast an eager wistful glance in that lovely girlish face, and heard him reply in a low smothered voice,

"I had rather want discernment than feeling."

"So would I not," returned she, "for one is a very useful quality, and the other a very troublesome possession."

"You do not speak from experience of the latter," said Claude bitterly."

"So much the better for me," replied Flora, "if it is so, for then I shall mind neither unkind speeches from some people, or unkind conduct from others."

And then, before Claude could speak a word, she had run on and passed her arm through Juliet's, and as they both quickened their steps they were soon out of sight and hearing.

There was a cloud on my brother's face, and I did not like to speak to him, but I pondered over all that had passed between him and Flora with extreme anxiety. I could hardly define the nature of it, nor could I tell myself *what* it was I feared. There was no love making between them—they did not even seem on terms of friendship, and yet, there was something about Claude that told

me he was different to what he was when I last saw him. And Flora too. I could not help being surprised at the tone she assumed with my brother; she was also so changed from the childish girlish creature I had always considered—or wished to consider her. She spoke more now as I imagined a practised woman of the world might have done. Did she dislike Claude, and try on that account to annoy him; or—I turned away from *that* thought—it could not be.

Mr. Crofton soon after drew near and came and talked with me; he asked me about my new experiences of life, and the very little I had seen and done in London; he did not talk to me of the Ramsays, but seemed pleased to hear I had found so kind a friend in Lady Percival, with whose name and history he seemed quite familiar, though, he said, he had no personal acquaintance.

How pleasant was that walk and talk. I ventured, during the course of it, to allude to the papers he had published in the ——. He

listened kindly, and did not seem displeased when I told him how much they had been appreciated by Lady Percival; he even smiled as he observed,

"After all, it is pleasant to speak to people who can understand what you say."

Surely, thought I, she was right; he does like the intercourse of thought with a wider range of intelligent beings than he can find here—Lady Percival is right. I could not resist saying, having so good an opportunity for asking him afterwards,

"How does Claude go on? I hope you find him as diligent and as useful as at the first."

I was glad I had taken courage to ask, when the reply came,

"Claude! he is the best good fellow in the world; I cannot tell you how much I like him. I can manage for myself much better than I could when he first came to help me, but, I would not part from him for the world. I only fear lest he may find the same round of daily em-

ployment here monotonous and irksome. He is, too, such a thorough gentleman in all his thoughts, words, and actions."

Very pleasant words were those to me from the friend I esteemed more highly than any other in the world; and great was the ease and assurance they brought to my somewhat perplexed mind.

As we walked home together, I could not resist telling Claude what had passed in regard to him, and imparting Mr. Crofton's favourable opinion about himself.

Claude listened eagerly, but with a sad expression to my recital, and then he exclaimed—

"And did Mr. Crofton say that of me? The dear good man! God bless him, and all belonging to him! I do not deserve the least of what he says, Minnie; but yet it is very pleasant to hear he does think it—for he thinks it, or he would not say it; he is true as tried gold in all he says and does. He has been the best and the kindest of friends to

me, Marian! I would lay down my life for that man."

"And yet, Claude," I answered, "you tried to make me believe that Mr. Crofton could do quite well without you."

"And so he could," said Claude abruptly.

"And *he* says," returned I, regardless of the interruption, "that he would not part with you for the world! There, what do you say to that, Claude?"

"Nothing. What can I say to such goodness? I can only do the best I can whilst I am with him."

"Whilst you are with him, Claude. What folly could possess you to wish to leave him?"

"Ay, *what* folly! You may well ask that, Marian; but for the present I am *there*, and if I *can* I will remain—now, don't talk any more about it please, Marian, there is a good soul—depend upon it I will do the best I can whilst I can."

After that I dared say no more, but I felt

uneasy for my brother, for I fancied he was not as happy as when I last saw him, and then I thought of his former debts and difficulties, and whether there might be some unknown follies in the background now rising up to torment him; but I held my peace.

The summer time came quickly, and seemed to glide as swiftly away. It was a beautiful one that year, and very favourable to pleasant little meetings with our nearest neighbours.

The great event of that summer was the acquisition of some new friends—Dean Elton and his family. Mrs. Elton's relations happened to be acquainted or connected with some part of Mrs. Markham's family, so she and Miss Ramsay made a point of calling as soon as the Dean was settled in Thorpe, and as there were sons and daughter's besides, we soon progressed to a considerable degree of intimacy. There was a good deal of visiting amongst us all in a quiet way. I do not think Luke often joined our little parties, for he had a great deal of parochial work just

then, and as the hamlet was a wide and scattered one, Luke seemed to find he had enough on his hands without any "vain visiting from house to house," as he called it.

One of the Dean's sons was his Curate, and resided at home, and with him Luke would have condescended to fraternize to a certain extent; but the young man, I think, rather preferred some of the livelier members of our little coterie to the solemn brother Curate, who cared so little for the world and its ways.

The three Miss Elton's were nice, ladylike girls, ready to take part in whatever might be going on, though Juliet declared they were not "earnest enough;" in fact, they *liked* dancing better than teaching in schools, though they did both. So they soon found a more congenial companion in Flora Crofton than in Juliet Markham. I almost wondered at the readiness with which Mr. Crofton admitted their advances to intimacy in his house. But Mary told me her brother began to think

he had been too exclusive in regard to Flora's bringing up, and that it would be better for her to have a wider range of society, now she had left her school-room.

No doubt he hardly knew how to set about making so great a change, and as the Eltons were the first people that offered themselves as society in his retirement, and being well connected and well mannered and educated, he rather welcomed the acquaintance perhaps as an opening to a more extensive one hereafter. But having so long shut his doors to the outer world, it may easily be supposed that in such a secluded neighbourhood as ours it might be some time before any latent inclination to open them would be recognised as widely as might be desired.

Flora seemed delighted to have found some fresh friends in the three girls, the eldest of whom was only twenty, and no doubt equally well pleased with the evident admiration testified by their brothers; for there were two besides the Curate, all older than the sisters,

and whenever opportunity offered they joined the home party. The eldest was in the army, the younger still at College, so when all the family were assembled it made a large and pleasant addition to our usual quiet little gatherings.

Mrs. Markham, too, in her restored activity, found it pleasant to drive over to Thorpe, the town where the Eltons lived, and both she and Miss Alethea decided that the coming of the Dean's family was one of the pleasantest events that had befallen the neighbourhood for some time past.

I found, however, with such a great increase of numbers in our little parties, it was next to impossible to carry out one's observations on any particular person. Still, I fancied Claude seemed to find a fresh interest in the society of our new neighbours; and they—that is, the three sisters—were evidently charmed both with him and his good looks and frank, pleasant manners; but whether it was Mary, Julia, or Carrie Elton he liked

best I was utterly unable to decide—indeed he seemed to divide his attentions very equally between them all.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN we first became acquainted with the Eltons the year of mourning for my father was just expired. Soon after that Mrs. Markham laid aside her weeds, and with them much of the apathy and indolence which had characterised all her proceedings during her widowhood. She seemed suddenly to wake up into a new sense of her maternal obligations towards Juliet, and this sudden phase of feeling was displayed in a manner by no means satisfactory to her daughter.

Mrs. Markham declared her intention of looking more closely into Juliet's way of spending her time, and also seeing that she

was better dressed, and better fitted for society in every way. Thus it happened that one morning Mrs. Markham announced her intention of calling at the Deanery after luncheon, and desired that Juliet should be in readiness to go with her. But, as no Juliet was visible at the time Mrs. Markham declared her intentions, inquiries were instituted as to where she might be found, and, as I was cross-questioned on the occasion, I could only say that I believed Juliet was either at the school or else gone to visit some of the poor people.

"I am quite sick of the poor people!" returned Mrs. Markham, with a look of great disgust. "I mean," she added, a moment afterwards, "when they interfere with everything else in life. I have given in a great deal to Juliet in that as well as every other respect, for really I have not felt equal to combating her headstrong follies. I intend in future to make her remember that she has a mother, whom it is her duty to

obey. I hope, Marian, you don't think me very exacting?"

This was said in a little taunting tone, as though I were an accomplice in Juliet's misdemeanours; but I found courage to reply, seeing my step-mother waited for an answer.

"Indeed no, I think you have always been very considerate and indulgent to Juliet."

"Well, I don't mean to be so any more, at least to the extent of letting her go her own foolish way without let or hindrance; so I should be glad if any one will find out where she is, and tell her I want her—yes, say I desire her to come to me this instant."

Miss Alethea was at that moment entering the room, and stopped to hear what her sister was saying, then observed,

"Oh—if it is Juliet you want, you will find her somewhere in the back regions—for I left her there, packing up a basket full of things, to take to her protèges."

At this Mrs. Markham rose up, and telling me to follow, set of in search of her daughter.

Juliet was discovered on the very point of departure, with her basket laden with various trifles, such as she could procure in her very limited way, for the poor people. I was sorry to see the girl's face of annoyance as her mother, with ill-judged displeasure, desired her to put down her basket, and display the stores it contained, saying,

"A pretty example, indeed! I will not have things taken out of the house without my knowledge and permission! I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself, Juliet!"

"I don't see why I should be, mamma," returned she, rather defiantly, and yet with tears of mortification brimming into her eyes, as she obeyed her mother's orders and submitted her basket with its treasures to her mother's inspection whilst, the old cook, coming up to the rescue, observed indignantly,

"Them bits be only what Miss Juliet beg-

ged, as I was agoing to put 'em into t'ould dog's bucket."

"Then it was shameful waste on your part, Martha, and very wrong indeed in Miss Juliet," exclaimed Mrs. Markham, who, in her indiscrimanate zeal for economy one day and her utter indifference another to all that was going on in her house, was sure to cast her blame upon the wrong person and the wrong thing.

In the present instance there was certainly no call for censure. Miss Alethea's rigid supervision made it next to impossible, were there even the inclination, that anything in the way of waste or extravagance could be carried on in the domestic department. Juliet had only begged for the scraps, which she had placed in her basket, with some little packets of tea and sugar she had bought herself, with some trifles that I had also been able to furnish out of my scanty store. These, with some coarse clothing made up by herself, and a few little books and tracts given by my

grandfather to lend in the parish, composed the contents of poor Juliet's confiscated basket.

After a good deal of unpleasant altercation, in which, unfortunately, the daughter had by by far the best of the argument, a sort of compromise was entered into. Juliet was permitted to proceed on her errand that morning on the express condition she should be well and neatly dressed, and ready to accompany her mother in her drive at three o'clock, and then Juliet was permitted to depart.

The fact was, I think, Mrs. Markham succumbed to the stronger will and determination of her daughter. Up to a certain point, Juliet was amiable and manageable enough, but there was a stubborn spirit in the young girl, which once roused, was capable of very determined resistence even to those who had the best right to command both her duty and obedience.

Thus, whilst we had been absent in

London, Juliet had set herself the task of attending to her mother as well as her poorer neighbours; but now that we were returned, and her mother appeared able and willing to exert herself, she imagined she was at liberty to go her own way, unchecked by any consideration save her own inclination.

Juliet was a very difficult temper to deal with, for with all her amiable and good intentions, there was a fearful allay of obstinacy and positiveness. I could hardly wonder at Mrs. Markham's annoyance, as she watched her daughter's receding figure at the termination of their dispute. Juliet was by no means a pleasant or even lady-like looking object as she proceeded on her way dragging, rather than carrying, her large basket with her, and dressed in an untidy limp, rather dirty cotton morning gown, ill-fitting boots with more than one hole in them, no gloves, and a very battered bonnet, with whisps of faded strings tied in the most slovenly fashion it was possible to

conceive. Add to all this a tall stiff figure, untidy hair, and a face which had nothing but youth to recommend it. I felt that Mrs. Markham was so far right; that it would be needful to put a sort of curb of civilization on Juliet, and compel her in some degree to conform to the manners and appearance of that state of life and order of society in which her lot had been cast. She did not return from her rounds till long past our early luncheon hour, and there was barely time for her to perform her toilet, and keep her promise to her mother.

However, a promise was to Juliet a sacred thing, and she ran upstairs without taking rest or refreshment to get ready for her drive. I had so far anticipated her movements that I had looked out her neatest apparel, and was in her room to help her put it on, and would have ran down to get her some food if she had not prevented me by saying,

"I am not starving, Minnie; I had a crust and a potatoe at Miss Jones's an hour ago, so

now help me in this horrid task of making myself fine enough to go out with mamma on these dreadful visits!"

I did not care to preach to Juliet, she was quite inaccessible that way, and it was not my vocation. I only begged her in general terms to try and do what was required that afternoon, and especially to stand or sit still, whilst I made her and her tangled locks as tidy as circumstances permitted.

Her irritation subsided by degrees, and I do not think she was displeased to find how nice she looked in her pretty grey silk, with black lace shawl and white bonnet, with her shining hair neatly arranged beneath it, new gloves and a tidy pair of boots, made such a decided improvement in her appearance altogether, that no one would have recognized in Juliet, prepared for her drive, the same slatternly girl that had issued from the back door with her big basket a few hours before.

Juliet was by no means an impulsive young person, yet she was not devoid of affection in

her own quiet way; so she turned round and kissed me, after I had made her look in the glass, and said,

"This very tidy young lady is your manufacture, Minnie. I have nothing to do with her, and, after all, though I thank you for helping me to keep my promise to mamma, I fear it is a sad truckling to the pomps and vanities of this wicked world."

"Don't be afraid, dear, in this instance, but that you are doing the best thing that lays in your power as to the present time."

"I am not quite so sure about that, Minnie," said she, turning to speak as she was leaving the room, adding, "My fear is that one concession will pave the way for larger demands hereafter; but there is one thing I am determined to do, and that is, should such be the case, I will do nothing without spiritual permission."

Before I could ask Juliet the meaning of her strange expression she had ran downstairs, and I followed. I was glad to see

her mother's look of approbation as she looked at Juliet and said,

"Well, really for once you are decent, Juliet! for though I get you nice things, you hardly ever take the trouble to put them on tidily. Now, mind the high step, and get properly into the carriage."

The carriage in question was, with the exception of a rough pony-chair, the only sort of equipage reserved in the altered state of our establishment; it was a one-horse sort of phaeton, which, having a head, and means of making it proof against weather, had been retained in preference to any other. It only held two comfortably, and therefore it was that I was left at home on the present occasion.

It was late before they returned, and I neither saw my step-mother nor Juliet till just before dinner, when Claude joined us as usual. Mrs. Markham was in remarkably good spirits, more lively and talkative than I had seen her for a long time; the drive, or the visit to

the Deanery, had evidently done her good. She soon opened upon the subject that appeared to occupy her thoughts the most pleasantly—telling us we were *all*, looking round the table, asked to a large party Mrs. Elton intended giving next week.

Miss Ramsay looked up at her sister with a slight twinkle of surprise in her black eyes, and asked—

"And are you meaning to go yourself, Charlotte?"

"Well, I don't see any reason why I should not. Mind, this is a *morning* party, not an evening one; and there is to be some music in the house, and some archery or something out of doors for the young people. It all sounded very pleasant, did not it, Juliet?"

"It seems it did to you, mamma."

"Well, I think it is only right and proper, and incumbent on me—pleasant or not—that I should exert myself a little now, and take these two girls out—eh, Alethea?"

"If that is all, Charlotte, you know *I* can

take them very well—if you wish to keep quiet a little longer—but if, candidly, you like a little variety, and think it will be good for you, then I say let us all go together, by all means. I daresay I shall like it quite as well as the young ones."

Miss Alethea's likings or disliking on the occasion seemed very immaterial to Mrs. Markham, who proceeded to discuss the subject in all its various bearings, even to the mode of transit, when the day should come, observing to her sister,

"We must have both carriages; you and I can go in the pheaton, and Claude can drive the two girls in the pony-chair."

"Don't trouble yourself about me, mother. I can get there very well—at least, Mr. Crofton asked me to go with them—it was all settled two or three days ago."

"Oh! they were asked before us, then?"

"It seems so?" answered Claude, indifferently.

"But then," persisted his mother, "now

we *are* going, I should like you to come with us; besides, there will be no one to drive the pony-chair, for Joseph must come with us; so you will be wanted to drive your sisters."

"Well, I will see about it, then," said Claude, good-naturedly.

"Pray don't, Claude, on *my* account," said Juliet, in a half whisper, as we left the room; "for I do not think I shall go; but don't say anything about it yet—only go with the Croftons, and don't think of me."

"Well—but, Marian?—how is she to get there?"

"Oh! I leave you and her to settle that," said Juliet, as she passed me quickly.

I saw she did not wish to talk about her visit to the Eltons, at least to me that evening, as she took up a book directly we went into the drawing-room, and looked much absorbed in it, so I took the hint, and did not disturb her; and as the evening was rainy we none of us stirred out.

The next day, as it was a bright, beautiful

morning, I set off soon after breakfast to make an early visit to my grandfather. I was, however, detained by a call or two I made at some cottages as I passed, and it was later than I intended when I arrived at the Parsonage.

As I approached the sitting-room I heard the sound of voices within, and felt sorry I should not find him alone; but being there, I opened the door and went in.

I was rather surprised to find the speaker was my sister Juliet, who, accompanied by her constant assistant Miss Jones, appeared to be making an early call. Both my grandfather and Luke were in the room; they had evidently been surprised by the two ladies at their morning work, Luke was seated at a table appropriated to himself and his writing—this table was very like Luke himself, it had a stiff, well-arranged, rather precise look; everything upon it, in the way of parish papers, were neatly labelled and tied up together, and some books of reference laid in

a separate corner ready for use. He sat with a half-written page before him, and a pen beside it, as if lately laid aside and waiting the desired opportunity of being taken up again. However, he looked very placid and resigned, leaning his elbow on the table and awaiting the lady's pleasure, who seemed to have just risen from her seat and was standing between him and the old man at the small table, which was drawn into the window. My grandfather was inclining his head slightly towards Juliet, as if to hear the better; the expression of his aged face was kind and courteous, but he still kept his book on his knee with his finger between the pages, whilst he held his paper knife in the other hand, unconsciously tapping the table with it, as he seemed to arrive at any conclusive apprehension of Juliet's meaning.

Miss Jones' chair was rather in the background, she was evidently not present on her own account that morning, for she was looking at a paper in her hand, which she no

doubt supposed she was reading, but it was evident she was listening intently to every word that was said,

"I had no idea you were coming here, Juliet, this morning, or we might have walked together," said I, after having duly greeted the gentlemen and shaken hands with passive Miss Jones.

"I came here on business of my own, Marian, and did not think it necessary to trouble you. I wished to see your grandfather, and request his unbiased and sound advice."

"If I am in the way," returned I, "I can go away."

"There is no occasion," said Juliet; "I have stated my case to your grandfather—and—and Mr. Dillon, and as soon as I have heard their opinion I am ready to depart."

And then she looked from one to the other with a steady questioning gaze.

"What is all this mighty matter about?" I asked rather impatiently.

"It is a matter of conscience," returned

Juliet gravely, still keeping her eyes vibrating between the old and young clergyman.

My grandfather smiled, whilst Luke cleared his throat as if preparing for an oration, but was anticipated by the old man, who said,

"Then you want to know, my dear, as far as I can gather your meaning, whether you, as a seriously inclined young woman, would be acting properly and consistently in consenting to accompany your mother and (sister I suppose) to some little party at Dean Elton's next week?"

"It is—I hear, a very large party," interposed Juliet; "and it is the principle of such meetings that I desire to withstand. It appears to me, that constant gay visiting, and dressing, and wordly talk and all that, is—is to say the least a most ruinous waste of time—of time that might be devoted to most useful purposes, to visiting the sick, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, instructing the ignorant," continued she, warming with her own eloquence, whilst Miss Jones fairly dropped

her paper, and fixing her eyes admiringly on her young friend, murmured out,

"Ah, yes, indeed! Oh what!—oh what a preacher!—no—I mean—what a clergyman's wife she would make!"

At that climax Juliet stopped abruptly, and coloured slightly, whilst Luke looked straight before him and spoke not; then after a moment, Juliet recovering her momentary embarrassment, turned to my grandfather and said in a lower and less sententious tone,

"Indeed, sir, all I desire is to know my duty and be enabled to do it faithfully."

"Then I should say, my dear, your duty at present is paramount as a daughter, and I can entirely advise your doing in this instance as your mother wishes, without in any way hindering your performing all the good offices you mention in due time and season,"

Juliet looked a little vexed, but said,

"Then I suppose I must go to all the parties we are asked to?"

"I think you may safely venture to pro-

mise for a few," said my grandfather, again smiling.

"You can go by way of penance, Juliet," said I laughing; but Luke looked at me rather wistfully.

"I wish you would not make a joke of such things, cousin! You talk lightly of 'penance,' but how little you realize what that means—the pains, the penalties that constitute the real meaning of such acceptable sacrifices."

"No, Luke, I can't agree with you there; both you and Juliet are striving to wind yourselves too high for mortal man; when you begin to talk of 'acceptable penance,' then I think of the cloistered cell."

"Yes," said my grandfather, "and then we are apt to forget the 'trivial round and common task' that will furnish all we ought to ask. Don't you see that, my dear, in the little case you mention? You can finish the rest of the verse," turning to Juliet.

She answered only,

"I will think about it, sir. I will please my mother as far as I can, but nothing will induce me to lead a gay worldly life."

"I do not think we shall have much temptation here," said I, seeing Juliet in her present mood would rather be a victim than not. However, she merely said she was ready to go home then, and we left together, dropping Miss Jones at her own door. But the rest of our walk was very silent. Juliet had exhausted her eloquence.

CHAPTER III.

CLAUDE drove Juliet and me to the Deanery, and declared he liked it quite as well as going with Mr. Crofton's party. We found them all assembled when we got there: and after all, there were much fewer people than I had expected from what Juliet had said. I suppose her fears had magnified the evil till the dreaded party had swelled in imagination to a proportionate extent. As it was, there was only a sister of Mrs. Elton's, a Lady Clifford and her daughters in addition to the ladies we expected to see. Whilst Sir Herbert Clifford, and some brother officers of Captain Elton (who was quartered in the neighbourhood) were all

the reinforcements on the gentlemen's side. Cyril Elton, his father's curate, was at home of course, and the Oxonian Wilfred also made one of the party.

It was much pleasanter than had it extended, as I was given to suppose, over a much larger number of the Dean's acquaintances, both in the town and adjoining neighbourhood. Every one seemed bent on being friendly and agreeable, and as the few strangers were pleasant people, we all got on to perfection. It was the first specimen of anything in the way of a party, except amongst ourselves, that Juliet and I had seen, and I observed that my young sister after a time lost something of her stiff self-conscious manner, and seemed to enjoy herself like the rest of the young people present.

Before our arrival I had rather marvelled in my own mind at Mr. Crofton's concession in accompanying his sister and daughter to the Deanery on that particular occasion (ex-

pecting to see such a large assemblage there), knowing how entirely he had kept himself aloof for so many years from such gatherings.

I saw, however, that he was especially invited to meet Sir Herbert Clifford, with whom he soon coalesced. I fancied there was truth in the inference that Lady Percival had drawn from his writings—i.e. that he craved after a congenial mind. Mrs. Elton's brother-in-law was well known as an antiquarian of repute, and as a clever man altogether. He had come in to that neighbourhood to explore some of its geological haunts and antiquarian treasures with which he had heard it abounded. He was particularly bent on visiting those ruins on Mr. Crofton's property a few miles distant, where we were to have gone the day of our sudden recall home. As soon as Mr. Crofton was made acquainted with Sir Herbert's wishes, he gave a ready permission to all the Dean's party to explore, whenever they pleased, on

his land. He had been induced at the same time to accept the invitation to the Deanery with the view of being introduced to the Eltons relations.

Even that concession implied that my old friend was taking a step forward in the social direction, and perhaps it was as much then on his own account as his daughter's.

Our party was quite numerous enough to allow of all sorts of divisions and subdivisions without being in any way remarkable. Flora, I observed, particularly singled out her old friend Juliet as the object of her special attention, at which I was both surprised and pleased; I should have expected that her newer and more fashionable young lady acquaintances would have engrossed far more of her regard. She was herself, I could see, an object of great admiration and attention to all the young men present. No wonder at that! Her youth and extreme and peculiar beauty, was enough to attract of

itself; but there was much besides I could see that made Flora very charming in the eyes of every man that approached. She entered as easily into the spirit of everything that was going on about her as if she had lived in a round of society all her life. She had, young as she was, a good deal of her father's acuteness in conversation, and no shyness whatever to prevent her saying anything that might enter her imagination. Sometimes she seemed a very child in the simplicity and naïvete of her remarks, and at others a perfect woman of the world.

Perhaps it might be this great variability which gave so piquant a charm to her society and conversation. As I have said, this first experience in party-giving was very pleasant. We had the music and the archery promised by Mrs. Markham; the first was very good, the Miss Cliffords being first-rate performers and excellent vocalists. Miss Clifford, who was somewhat *passée*, but had a splendid

voice, accompanied herself on the guitar; she brought it out of doors and sang to our great delight—she certainly enchanted all her audience, young and old. Of the former there was a very young officer in Captain Elton's regiment, who was so captivated that in the course of a few days he offered himself to the lady's acceptance—unhappily for him. I heard his suit was summarily dismissed.

I took my first lesson in archery then and there. (It was before the days of croquet). Flora had become quite proficient that summer. She liked the amusement and had practised constantly, and it suited her graceful figure well. She seemed also to have a good eye and a steady hand, so she soon excelled in the art. I found that Claude also shot well. He was one of those people who generally succeed in all they attempt to do. In fact Flora Crofton and Claude Markham carried all before them that day.

I did not think, however, that my brother looked at all elated by his success. On the contrary, he had a wearied, dissatisfied appearance, which vexed and surprised me, and made me ask if anything were going wrong with him. Every one else there seemed to be enjoying themselves. Even Juliet, I observed, listened with a benign expression of countenance to Cyril Elton, who appeared to be endeavouring to make himself agreeable to her.

When the luncheon or cold collation, which was laid in a large sort of summer or greenhouse in the garden, was announced, Cyril appropriated Juliet immediately, leaving me, who had been of their party previously, to myself. Claude, with his usual kindness, came immediately to my rescue, which I was glad of, as it is not pleasant to find oneself alone, when all the rest of the world are hurrying past in pairs.

"Come with me, Minnie," said Claude, taking me under his arm; "we can find our

way in without ceremony, I suppose. Everybody seems to be going their own way—let us go ours."

At that moment Mr. Crofton hurried up to us.

"Oh! it is all right. I see you are well taken care of. I just came to see you were not lost in the crowd—knowing you are rather an inexperienced hand."

He looked kindly upon us, and then I heard a voice say—

"Ah, Mr. Crofton, where have you hid yourself? Do be so kind as to take Lady Clifford in to luncheon."

And Mrs. Elton appeared for a moment, and soon after disappeared, with Mr. Crofton following her.

Another moment and the Dean, with Mrs. Markham on his arm, sailed past us. Miss Alethea was disposed of to an elderly little man in spectacles who was staying in the house, and who came up to her shoulder, but who appeared, nevertheless, to be an

amusing personage, from the ceaseless manner in which he chatted away and she laughed and talked (as much as she could) in reply. Then, when her elder guests were fairly and honourably disposed of, Mrs. Elton bade the younger ones pair themselves and find places as they best might—a mandate which every one seemed very ready to comply with; and then Claude and I started for the goal in view in our turn. I could not help saying—

"How kind of you, dear Claude, to come to me, when I know too you would so much rather take one of your young lady friends—one of the Miss Eltons, or perhaps these new cousins of theirs."

"Make yourself easy on that head, Minnie. I would not give that" (a flip with his finger by way of illustration) "to take in all five at once!"

"Ah! that would be too much of a good thing, no doubt, but some *one* of the five."

"Then I assure you, on my word of honour, I would rather *not*."

Then came a certain degree of pleasurable bustle, with a little pushing, attendant on some people seating themselves and others trying to do so.

Claude and I had just began to congratulate ourselves on having found a quiet corner, which was rather out of the way, and therefore less liable to invasion than the better places in the temporary dining-room, when I felt a little hand laid on my shoulder, and heard a petitioning voice say in a half whisper—

"Oh! do let me come in!—no, don't stir, Mr. Markham; just make a little room—the least bit in the world—between you and Marian, so that I may sit by her; but don't go yourself, or we shall have all the regiment trooping in."

"Goodness! Flora, who would have dreamt of your wanting a place, and such a one, too!" I exclaimed, as we made room as she required, and she gently slipped into the small space we could afford to give her, and remain ourselves as desired; then, after she was seated, I asked

—"But surely you did not come in alone?"

"Oh! no," she rejoined smiling—"I had quite a staff of officers; but there is safety in a multitude, so I escaped from them all, and came to you, Marian."

"Why did you want to escape, Flora?—you have seemed well content with your 'staff' all the morning."

"Ah! *faute de mieux*," she answered carelessly; "but I was getting tired of them all, and wanted a little rest."

"And refreshment, I suppose?" said Claude shortly—"so what shall I give you?"

"Oh! anything you like: it is all the same to me. There is some iced water there; give me the least drop—I am thirsty."

Claude took the caraffe in his hand to help her, but I observed his hand shook so, he could hardly pour the water into the glass. He saw me look at him, and answered to my look—

"Yes, I am very awkward; it is all holding my bow so long this morning; my hand has

got quite cramped. It will be better presently."

We sat almost in silence; neither Flora nor Claude appeared disposed to do more than trifle with some fruit, but I saw he eagerly accepted the offer of champagne, and emptied his glass at a draught.

"Are you tired still?" I asked Flora, as we rose to go.

"Yes, rather; but this has been a blessed rest to me!" And then, when we turned to leave the table, she laughed lightly to see several of her faithful staff standing near her chair, and ready to accompany her on to the archery ground, or into the music-room, or anywhere or everywhere she might choose to lead them; and then, suddenly rousing herself from her lassitude, she began to laugh and talk with those nearest to her.

Claude kept his place by me, though Flora looked round two or three times, as if she wished us to join her clique.

"Why don't you go, Claude?" I said at last

to him. "I really believe Flora likes the society of her old friends as well as her new."

"Meaning yourself," returned my brother—"I should hope she did; but my company and conversation can be but little gain to her."

I looked in Claude's face, and said no more. A painful suspicion darted into my mind, but I thought it best to keep it there. Mr. Crofton, released at last from his attendance on Lady Clifford, came towards us to find his daughter, and see what we were all about.

"I am glad you are with Flora," said he to me. "Mary has been appropriated by Miss Clifford, and it is not easy to escape that accomplished young lady. It is almost time to go, so, if you please, we will keep all together now."

Mr. Crofton had too much tact to seem annoyed by Flora's flirtations; he only joined himself to the little group that accompanied her, of which, at his request, I made one, and then began the pleasantest time of that day to me. I had at a distance seen Mr. Crofton

talking to others, and observed how people listened to all he said, and rather envied the group that were collected round him. It was not that he talked much, but what he said so quietly seemed so amusing, so much to the purpose; and then he himself appeared pleased and ready to be amused. I knew his countenance so well, I never dreamt of his concerning himself about me, or coming to bestow on me any of that conversation which was evidently so highly prized. I was content to look on, and pleased to see my old friend so well appreciated. I hardly considered at that time how far it might remove him from me.

Well, the pleasant day came to a close at last, and we soon after found ourselves driving home in the soft twilight of a sweet summer's evening. Our road lay through deep lanes, bordered with honeysuckle-scented hedges, and over broad patches of wild moorland heath. We were all rather silent, under the influence of the time and scene, more dis-

posed to muse over past enjoyment than to discuss it with each other; and so we passed along, no sound marking the progress of our way except the muffled noise of the wheels passing through the deep sand, and the clink of our pony's feet, as they struck against the loose stones in his path. At last, as we came near home, Juliet, who was sitting behind, observed,

"I am sorry we are almost at the end of our drive. It is such a beautiful evening!"

"Yes, and we have had a very pleasant day also," I returned.

"And this is the best part of it," said Claude, in his turn; and then, turning to Juliet, asked, "But how did you like it all, for I heard you made some objection to going?"

Juliet paused for a moment, and then answered cautiously,

"It was all very well, as far as my own experience went; but I don't uphold parties in a general way."

"But you saw nothing very objectionable in

this specimen?" asked Claude. Then, as Juliet did not reply, he asked his sister, "And, after all, that young Cyril Elton is not a bad fellow at all, is he, Juliet?"

"I hope not," returned his sister.

"I thought I saw him a good deal with you," said Claude.

"Yes, we had some improving conversation."

"Indeed! Improving? Who to, you or him?"

"Both I hope," returned Juliet, gravely, then added, "Mr. Cyril Elton, too, seems very fond of music—I mean of the right sort. He seems to have a large collection, and has promised to let me see some of it."

"Oh! then I suppose he will bring it for you to the next party where he may hope to have the pleasure of meeting you?"

"I do not think he expects anything of the kind—nor do I. I assure you, Claude, because I have been to a party to-day, there is no occasion to be thinking of going to another

directly. Indeed, I should be sorry if that were the consequence of this day's idleness and vanity."

Juliet need not have alarmed herself as to fears of future gaiety arising from that solitary specimen. Mrs. Elton's pleasant little party was not followed up by anything of the same kind. Although Mrs. Markham and Miss Ramsay expressed themselves well pleased with their visit to the Deanery, neither seemed inclined to follow the example set there. They evidently enjoyed hospitality at their friends' houses more than at their own. Mrs. Markham declared, in her position, it could not be expected that she should give expensive parties, though she was willing to exert herself, and take us out in a quiet way when occasion offered.

None, however, presented itself at that time. People seemed inclined to visit in twos and threes at a time, but not to include the whole circle of their acquaintance. Consequently we had no further invitations. Claude was asked at various times to join the Eltons and others

of their friends, and from him we heard of what was going on; but neither Mr. Crofton or his sister or daughter seemed to lead a much gayer life than we did. Perhaps he did not altogether approve of the evident sensation caused by Flora's beauty on the late occasion, and he might desire to keep her yet a little longer in the background, or in the retirement of her own home. She was still so very young, but at the same time so well able to take her own part in society, whenever the time might come for entering it more fully.

I found Mr. Crofton made quite a private little expedition with Sir Herbert Clifford to the spot he wished to explore on his property. I had indulged a hope we might all have been invited, to atone for past disappointment, but I soon found it was not so intended. Mr. Crofton himself announced the fact by saying, the day after they had been, when I asked who was of their party,

"Party! we did not want any party, especially ladies. They would only have been in our way." Then softened his speech by saying, "You see we went on business, not for pleasure."

CHAPTER IV.

I THINK it must have been rather more than a month after our pleasant day at the Deanery, when Claude brought me one evening a note from Mary Crofton. Its contents were :—

"DEAR MARIAN,

"Will you please come over and see me to-morrow? Bring Juliet, if you like; and stay to dinner if you can. We are about to move, so I hope you will not delay giving me the pleasure I ask.

"Yours affectionately,

"MARY CROFTON."

"Going away, Claude?" I asked, as I read her note. "Where are they going to?"

"Are they going?" asked Claude, in his turn. Adding, "Perhaps you will tell me when you have heard yourself. I am not in the secret."

It therefore only remained to wait with patience until the morrow. Juliet happily made no difficulty in going with me to the Hall; and we walked over in the afternoon. Claude was also asked to remain to dinner, and the pony-carriage was to be sent to take us home. When we arrived, Mary and Flora were looking out for us. Claude was, according to custom, busy with Mr. Crofton at that time of the day; but as they heard our voices in the hall, Mr. Crofton came out of the library, followed by his young secretary.

"There, Claude," said he—"I think we will take a holiday this afternoon. I shall leave you plenty of work in my absence, so you may as well have a little play now."

The recollection of that day is one of the

white ones that leave so indelible a mark in ones memory. There was nothing particular either said or done on that same day, and yet—yet how well and affectionately I remember it. Mary told me in few words, in her brother's presence, that they were going to make their usual visit to the sea-side. "So," she added, smiling, "why do you look surprised, as if we were about to do a strange thing?"

"Oh! no—not that at all. Only you say you are going to-morrow, and we only heard of it yesterday."

"Well," said Mr. Crofton, drily, "what difference would it have made to you if you had known our intentions a week or a fortnight sooner? You could only have come over and said good-bye to us, as you are kindly doing to-day."

I felt rather cowed—I hardly knew why or wherefore—so I held my peace; and as Mr. Crofton walked on (for we were in the garden) with Claude, Mary fell back for a

moment, and said in a hasty whisper, "It is sudden—you are quite right; but do not say so to him. Flora has not been well—she went into hysterics about some trifle or other a day or two ago, so Keene settled to take her at once to the sea."

"Yes; and where?"

"Oh! the old place—where we were last year."

"Don't you think she may feel *that?*" I ventured to ask. "I mean going to the place where she met Mr. Ramsay last year."

"I don't think so," said Mary, in reply; adding, "my belief is she never really cared for him—she might have been flattered by his attentions, but that is all."

"Then you do not think she is fretting for him?" said I, with a strange sinking sensation at my heart.

Mary Crofton in reply only shook her head, but said nothing, for her brother had slackened his pace, and now joined us. Claude hovered by his patron's side, and then in

his turn fell back, and was joined by the two girls, who were walking with their arms linked together, more in the fashion of former days than of late. We wandered through the wood, down to the river's side, and then Mr. Crofton told one of his woodmen to bring the boat; and whilst he gently rowed us down the stream, we chatted idly, or sat in luxurious silence. And then, whilst Mr. Crofton was making inquiries of the man about some swan's nests they had found on one of the little islets, the current of our talk went on. Mary was telling me something of local interest which attracted Juliet's attention, whilst Flora and Claude, who sat side by side, were silent. At length I heard her say,

"You will come down and see us whilst we are at Stornbay?"

I heard his answer—it was very low—

"Not if I can help it."

Then, after a long pause, she resumed—

"Papa will want his papers, and to hear so

many things. Oh! you must come, even if you do not like it."

"If——"

Just then Mr. Crofton's voice was heard saying,

"Claude, my dear boy, I have been arranging for you in my absence; your favourite mare will be kept up for your riding, and you must go out on the 12th" (it was August) "on the Moors, and if there is any young fellow you like to ask to go with you, do not scruple to do so. Pray amuse yourself as well as you can here; there are many things I want doing, whilst I am away, that you will have to see to for me; and then after a time I shall get you to run down to us and report."

I glanced up at Flora—she did not see me, for her eyes had sought my brother's, and were fixed on his face. I looked at him also, and read there, in that countenance of almost perfect manly beauty, a strange tale of trial and of conflict. He was pale even to his lips, and his brows were contracted as

with a sharp pain. He passed his hand over his forehead, and then his look became more steadfast and calm; he half rose from his seat, and then, though called to by the man, persisted in changing his place. He spoke almost impatiently—

"I must speak to Mr. Crofton." Then addressing him, said, "There is a good deal still to arrange, and you may depend upon me, sir, to do my very, very best for you. The more you can give me to do, the better I shall be pleased."

"There is room here, Claude," said I, as he moved from his place by Flora.

She gave a little shriek, and covered her confusion with saying,

"We shall, I know, be upset—oh! do let us land at once—how I hate this boat."

Then, as we made for the water edge, Flora was no sooner landed, and had seen her father and Claude walk away, than she sank down on the grass and burst into a passion of hysterical tears. Mary ran to her, calling her

by every endearing appellation, saying as she passed me—

"This is just the sort of attack she had the other day; it shows sad weakness, I fear."

"I fear it does," I returned; and then, with a little help and much coaxing, Flora came to herself, and looking lovely and tearful, like a wild rose after a shower, took hold of Juliet's arm and her aunt's, and was supported by them back to the house.

When we reassembled before dinner everything happily was changed. Flora reappeared, looking a little pale and delicate, but quite peaceful, even cheerful. She even laughed at her late "folly," as she called it, and addressing herself to Claude, said,

"I really thought when you got up to change your seat in the boat you would upset us all. I was quite sure our lives were in imminent danger."

"No, you were in no danger," replied Claude, rather shortly it seemed.

"Well—but—" pleaded Flora, looking up in

my brother's handsome face, with those sweet pleading eyes, "you must not be angry at my folly, Mr. Markham. I daresay it is very ridiculous ever to be afraid of anything, or in short to have any feeling at all."

"No," said Claude, "I never thought any such thing; in fact, I never dreamt of blaming you for being afraid. I am sure it was very natural, if you thought I was going to swamp the boat with my awkwardness; but you were, as I have told you, in no danger." And then, as we were all leaving the room, on the announcement of dinner, he added, in a low, hurried way, "No, nor ever shall be, if I can avert evil from *you*—from your father's child."

Flora's reply reached my ears, which seemed unnaturally acute on the occasion. It was given in a stifled voice—half pettish, wholly sorrowful—

"You always seem to be thinking more of him than of anyone else."

"And have I not cause?" was the answer.

Claude was very silent on our way home—he drove Juliet and me. I felt sad also; there was a sort of sorrowful sinking in my heart, with that dreary presentiment of evil that is inherent in some natures, though they are but half aware of it themselves. Juliet seemed in her usual spirits; hers was not a very sensitive disposition, and at this time she spoke freely of what was in her mind. She said she was glad that Flora was going to the sea—she thought it would do her good—for she was sure she was by no means as strong or well as she ought to be.

When Juliet said this, Claude woke up from his reverie, and turned sharply round upon his sister,

"What do you mean, Juliet?"

"Only what I have said. I daresay neither Mr. nor Miss Crofton have observed it, because they are always with her; but *I* see a great change in Flora."

"I do not," observed Claude, in a low, hesitating voice.

"Well, if you do not, it is because you are a man—and men never observe things as women do. Now I go about a great deal amongst the sick, and I can tell you both, that Flora really is, and looks fearfully delicate; surely, Marian, you must have seen it?"

"Oh, it is only her complexion that is so delicate; and she is spoilt and fanciful. I really think that is all, Juliet. She would do very well if people thought less about her, and she were less self-occupied. She wants wholesome occupation."

"I quite agree with you there," said Juliet eagerly; adding after a pause—

"I have tried to persuade her to take a class in the school, but she declared the closeness of the room made her feel faint. of course that was all fancy—and perhaps, as you say, Marian, Flora *is* very fanciful. Still I have no doubt her present state is *not* all fancy—I fear she is ill."

Then Claude seemed roused almost to

anger with us both, and accused us of speaking against our friend—and she so young, so lovely, so sweetly kind to every living soul: "only too much so," said the poor fellow, warming at his own words as he went on. "She think of herself! Ah, one only wishes she would do so more. How can you both —you two (to whom she has ever been more than kind)—talk as you do about her failing health being the result of her foolish self-indulgence! I am ashamed of you both!" and then the poor boy lashed the unoffending little pony till it broke into a most uneasy gallop, and spun us up to the door of the old home in an incredibly short space of time.

Juliet was about to answer her brother, and to show him in her calm superiority, how wrong he was in every way—but I pressed her arm to entreat forbearance. I saw his heart was very sore—and it was no time for argument or reproach—so she kept silence. We were both rewarded for our

consideration, for as we stood in the hall, taking off our light wraps, he came up to us, and kissing us in turn said,

"Good night, and thank you both for bearing with me; forgive me if I was cross, but any, and everything, that so nearly concerns my best and dearest friend, Mr. Crofton, naturally comes very home to my feelings," and then, without another word, Claude went to his room, and Juliet and I followed his example.

The next day, when my brother returned, he brought the intelligence that Mr. Crofton and his family were gone. I felt very uncertain how long their absence might last. They were going first, as I have said, to the sea place they visited every autumn, but Mr. Crofton had told me the preceding evening, he thought it not at all unlikely that he might take his family abroad that winter. It was a sorrowful hearing to me, but I knew it was not likely, especially now Flora was grown up, that my early friends would remain a fix-

ture at the Hall, as they had been in the days and years of her childhood. One thing that particularly impressed me at that time was, the warm regard Mr. Crofton professed for my brother. It seemed almost strange to me how Claude, with his careless boy's nature, and somewhat reckless antecedents (but warm and generous hearted withal), had won upon the feelings of the cool, cynical, disappointed man of the world. No doubt there was an answering chord in the heart of this man of the world (in whom, nevertheless, I had found so good and true a friend) which responded to all that was true and genuine and frank and affectionate in my young brother's more impulsive nature. With all his faults Claude was a most loveable person; his best qualities had never been called forth before that time. But there was the germ of many a sterling one lying folded in those unexplored depths of his heart and mind. The question had been whether the genial warmth of circumstances would cause them to flourish

and expand and bring forth good fruit, or whether other and adverse events would crush and cause them to perish in the bud.

"I like that boy," said Mr. Crofton to me that last evening I have mentioned.

"I have seen a great deal of him now—and I am glad I have—he puts me in better humour with human nature; he has a very true and generous disposition, with not a particle of selfishness in it; he has a real capacity for devoting himself to a cause, or it might be a person, supposing him attached to either. I think you might trust him to the death, sooner than he would betray a confidence once reposed in him."

"I am glad you think so well of Claude; you have, no doubt, had better opportunities of judging of his real qualifications, as well as power of estimating them, than I can possibly have."

Mr. Crofton smiled one of his peculiar little smiles which, to me expressed so much, and which paradoxical as it may sound, filled me

with a sort of awe as conveying so much more than I could possibly understand. However, in this case, he only answered quietly,

"Well, yes, perhaps I am a little better judge of character, even of your own brother, than you are likely to be; and as we have been rubbing our wits together, and showing up our sentiments on various subjects, I daresay we are both something the wiser, as to the calibre of our respective understandings, only—" and there Mr. Crofton paused, and pondered a minute or two, and then fixed those dark unsearchable eyes on my inquiring face—"only with this great difference, *I* am neither young nor impulsive—I only show as many of my thoughts as seems good to me to reveal, whereas your brother's lie perfectly at the mercy of those who may think it worth their while to discover their whole bent and tendency."

"I daresay Claude would be very willing to let you explore the treasures of his intellect."

"I was not talking about his intellect; it is

a very fair one, and no doubt one capable of great improvement, but it is his heart and disposition that have won upon my regard; in fact, I cannot speak more highly in his favour, than when I tell you simply, I feel that I can *trust* him."

I was aware *that* was great praise from Mr. Crofton, for I knew that he who had trusted once, and been so doubly deceived as he had been, had found it very difficult to put any confidence in man or woman for many a long year since. So, as I have said, the confidence he put in Claude was very gratifying—I do not mean *trust* as to honesty in conducting those money affairs that he might confide to him in his absence, but the confidence he placed in the truth of his character and the genuineness of his good feelings and devotion to himself. It seemed to give Mr. Crofton great satisfaction to be able to give my brother the many advantages which resulted from his position in his family. There was one peculiarity in Mr. Crofton's nature or disposition

which tended greatly to incline him thus to Claude. He put little faith in, or was inclined to trust, servants; he was, in fact, rather haughty and forbidding in his manner towards them. It was an unamiable trait no doubt in his character, but so it was. He had been deceived in former days by two favourite domestics, one had accompanied his faithless wife in her flight, and the other (his own man) had grossly pillaged his then too indulgent master and left him also. It happened at the time of which I speak, that the agent of the estate, an old man who had been in the situation, and had served Mr. Crofton's father many years, died. He left a son who had acted under him, but he was no favourite, for he was self-opiniated and forward; still, as he had considerable knowledge of the property, Mr. Crofton kept him on in his service under considerable restrictions and limitations, for, young as Claude was, Mr. Crofton placed all things unreservedly in my brother's hands. He left him entirely at liberty, both as regarded his own

amusements in his absence, or managing his affairs for himself.

"It is such a comfort," said he to me, "to have a gentleman to deal with. Claude's feelings are so perfect in that respect, that they intuitively point out the best way in many an intricate case, and then there is a frank courtesy about his manner which never offends others."

It was no wonder that, with such an opinion and so candidly expressed, not only did Mr. Crofton leave home in great comfort, but also he imparted much of that sentiment to us who were so deeply interested in Claude's progress at the old home; his mother even expressed herself satisfied!

CHAPTER V.

WE saw no more of our friends that year. After a few weeks passed at Stornbay, they moved on, still keeping near the coast, going south. At last we heard it was settled they should spend the winter abroad. We heard one day, to our surprise, that Mr. Crofton and Mary had been for a day to the Hall before they left Stornbay; they did not even remain the night, as it seemed they had left Flora behind.

I had a note afterwards from Mary. She said she had proposed the plan; she thought, as they were going away for some time, it would save a great deal of trouble. Her brother wanted to see Claude, so she con-

sidered altogether it might be preferable to his going over to see them at Stornbay. I perfectly agreed in my heart with Mary as to that clause, at the same time wondering whether her thoughts had ever taken the same painful direction that mine had done of late. She gave no hint if such were the case, simply saying there were a few household matters she wished to settle before her departure, so she judged it best to accompany her brother, adding they left Flora in very good care, as Sir Herbert and Lady Clifford, with their two daughters, were then staying at Stornbay; and though Flora did not particularly like the young ladies, she would find it better than being alone during their day's absence.

Mary said nothing about regrets at our not meeting during that flying visit—no doubt she felt I should only have been in her way, as it was evident she could have no spare time to bestow upon me. The regrets were all on my own side. I should like to have

seen my friends before they went abroad, and possibly Mary never gave the subject a thought. But I asked Claude—

"And did not Mary leave me any message?"

"She left none with me, but Mr. Crofton did."

Oh! was it possible that *he* could do so in the midst of all his business? I thought, with a joyful heart, and then asked quietly what the message might be.

"Oh! he only said you might have any books from the library—subject to my approval, you know," he said, laughing; "and if there were any flowers in the green-houses worth having this winter, I might send them to you, or my mother—I really forget which."

"Oh! but the books were for *me*, Claude."

"Decidedly, yes. I don't think my mother will wish to dispute that part of the message with you."

"Then please let Mrs. Markham have the flowers, Claude. I am content with my share."

Claude was a good deal absent from us that winter; we had a very severe one, and altogether were much left to ourselves. Mrs. Markham, having taken cold in a long drive to see her friends at the Deanery, was compelled to keep the house, and having nothing particular to do, amused herself in playing the invalid. It was at that time that Juliet succeeded in introducing a brother of Miss Jones, a medical man at Thorpe, of no particular repute, but a safe quiet man of a certain age, who appeared to consider the honour of attending the Honourable Mrs. Markham, and prescribing for her ailments, real or imaginary, almost equivalent to any other remuneration, and therefore made his charges proportionably moderate. He was in his quiet way a great retailer of gossip, and would have been on that account alone a valuable acquisition in our dull house. The merits of this Mr. Jones were quite a discovery on Mrs. Markham's part, seeing he had lived in the same neighbourhood so many years, and his

sister even under the shadow almost of the old home. Still, he had never been called in before. It is true my grandfather had been satisfied to commit his simple ailments to Mr. Jones's professional skill, and thought well of him, as he had done of his father for many a long year before. No doubt his practice lay for the most part in very humble directions, but it appeared to bring in sufficient remuneration, for Mr. Jones was a bachelor, and he had inherited a house and a small patrimony, which, his sister assured us all, more than sufficed for all his "modest requirements."

That he had elected to remain single all his life, Miss Jones further confided to me in a mysterious whisper, was all owing to my Aunt Alice. But it appeared that if he had ever proposed to her, the fact had never transpired in the family, so I took leave to doubt whether such had ever been the case. Perhaps he never told his love. Mr. Jones was not a sentimental looking person, but he seemed to answer the purpose of being the recipient of all Mrs.

Markham's confidences either as to her bodily or mental disquietudes. She chose to place the insignificant doctor on a pinacle erected by her own imagination; she declared he had done her more good than all the London doctors she had ever consulted put together; and, that being the case, she encouraged the little man to pay almost daily visits (after she had ascertained they would not he entered in his bill).

Miss Ramsay treated the whole affair with great contempt, till one unlucky day she awoke with a bad sore throat, and sundry other unpleasant symptoms, and was induced to put herself under the despised doctor's treatment. She found—or fancied she found it suited her so well (seeing the chief prescription consisted of plenty of mulled claret), that on her recovery, which was speedy and satisfactory, she immediately enlisted herself on the enemy's side, and gave in her adherence to the doctor accordingly.

Juliet was pleased, not only because of her

friend, but also that Mr. Jones was the parish doctor; and she knew many a kind and charitable trait of the humble man. Moreover, Luke spoke well of his grandfather's friend, and had looked approvingly on Juliet's attempts to introduce him into her own family, and it was certain that Luke kept the key of Juliet's conscience.

Thus it began to be quite a looked-for thing, that at least twice in the week we should see the shaggy head of Mr. Jones's rough pony trotting up to the door, and hear the doctor's well-known voice asking old Joseph the usual number of inquiries, as he disembarrassed himself of his top coat and wet leggings, and then using his pocket-handkerchief sonorously, proceed on his way to my step-mother's usual sitting-room.

He certainly helped that dreary winter away wonderfully. He never minded wind or weather; he seemed quite as much at home on the bleak moor's track, trotting across the

nearest cut from cottage to cottage, as in the well-known streets at Thorpe.

He was a simple-minded man, and had conceived the greatest respect, mingled with deferential admiration, of Mrs. Markham. She on her part made herself very pleasant (though I cannot say profitable) to her protegée. He was perfectly unassuming, so no one wished to stem the little stream of gossip that flowed withal so naturally and pleasantly, and fertalized our firside in bringing forth the acceptable fruits of kindly fellowship and family friendship. Everybody must have something to do—something to think about, be it ever so trivial: and the constant supply of petty objects of consideration which Mr. Jones supplied in our circle, kept us all from stagnation at that dreary season. As spring came on, his visits began to assume a degree of painful interest that made me look for them with a strange mixture of hope and fear.

My grandfather was declining; I could not shut my eyes to the fact that he was steadily,

if not rapidly, approaching "the old man's home." It was the one his eyes had long been fixed on, and his heart was already there, with the many treasures that were gathered up in its sanctuary. He said little to me on the subject, but for all that, we both realized what was impending.

I have said but little of my affection for the nearest relative I had in the world, nor do I wish now to dwell upon it. I can only recall with anguish what my sensations were when the good doctor told me at last, tenderly and with deep emotion in his voice, that my grandfather's days were numbered, the feeble flame of his existence was almost burnt out. I had always loved my mother's father with a very deep affection. There is too a peculiar feeling of almost mournful tenderness in the love we entertain for very aged persons. They are still amongst us, and yet how little can they participate in the interests which agitate the younger generation, who have grown up perhaps under

their sheltering care. If we grieve them, it seems doubly cruel to add to the many unknown pains and sorrows which may oppress them as they are nearing the unseen world, so strange and distant to the young, and yet so close to them, dimly to be discerned beyond the valley of the shadow of death. Oh! what awe must often oppress the soul of the aged pilgrim thus approaching his last home—a father's home, indeed, he trusts to find it; and yet how many a sad recollection must embitter the anticipated joy of that inevitable meeting. The spirit may indeed be willing to cast off its earthly garment and depart, but the flesh then is every way weak. Oh! who can tell how weak until they bear the burden of their fourscore years! Shame be to those who can find in the weaknesses and infirmities that too often accompany those declining days, subject either for ridicule or contemptuous pity.

My grandfather's fourscore years were fully then accomplished—he had borne the burden

of even more: but for the most part cheerfully and well. He had been a faithful servant to the Master he had served from his heart all the days of his life; and he had few of the fears and misgivings to which I have alluded, and which perplex and torment so many whose walk has been less upright. His chief earthly care was for me, and for my future. He sometimes looked wistfully towards Luke and me as we were united in our attendance by his side, often passing long silent hours in the same room, and kneeling together to catch his fluttering words as they came at intervals in short sentences of prayer and praise. Luke gave up everything to devote himself to the dying old man—his whole soul seemed to cleave to one who had been his best, almost only earthly father and friend. Luke knew that Juliet would be indefatigable in her ministrations amongst his poor people, so he kept unceasing watch with me beside the sick bed.

The very day before his death, my grand-

father seemed suddenly to wake up from his torpor—his mind was clear, and his speech, though weak and low, perfectly articulate. He had been gazing some time at Luke as he sat near, with bent head, reading in the dim light, and then he said,

"You have been a good son to me, Luke. You will stay here?" he added, with a faint, entreating smile—"here in this house, where I have lived so long. Do not leave the place nor the people, Luke."

"Dear grandfather," said Luke, his harsh voice softened almost to tenderness, "it is not in my option to remain here. You may be very sure I would gladly stay and watch over the flock you have loved and led so long, but I fear there is no abiding place here for me."

As the old man looked pained and perplexed, I reminded him that the living he had occupied so long was not Luke's—it belonged to Mr. Crofton—was in his gift."

"Ah! I forget everything," he replied feebly;

"but, stay, I see it now. Mr. Crofton is away, is he not? Well, then, let me write and ask him to give it to my son Luke. He will be a faithful servant, I know. Give me pen and paper."

Nothing would serve my grandfather but making the attempt to write to Mr. Crofton. Luke and I both endeavoured to dissuade him from the exertion. It was all in vain. Writing materials were procured, and the pen placed in the powerless fingers. But equally vain was the attempt to indite a letter; the pen fell from his hand, and sighing deeply he fixed his wistful eyes on me, saying—

"I leave the task I cannot do to you, dearie. You know him well—write and ask Mr. Crofton as soon as I am gone."

I was beginning, all in a tremble at the office assigned to me, to say I could not, when Luke prevented me. Slightly pressing my arm to insure my silence, he said—

"Let us leave things as they are, grandfather. Do not press Marian to do what

might be irksome; but leave it to Mr. Crofton. He knows me; and if he thinks me worthy of the charge he will, no doubt, bestow it on me. Do not vex about me, grandfather—Mr. Crofton knows me."

"No, no—he does not. Few people do know you, my Luke. Marian, it is my last charge to you. All may depend upon your writing to tell him I tried but could not—would that I could have done it! I should die easier if I left Luke in my place. Promise me, dearie, won't you?"

Then, pressing my lips on his poor pale face, I said—

"I do promise. I will write to Mr. Crofton and tell him all you say, darling grandpapa."

Luke made no further comment. His face was hidden in his hands, and he spoke no more.

In the early morning my grandfather's happy spirit passed away. His last words besides an earnest blessing were, "Remember,

dearie," and when I had said his wish should be fulfilled to the utmost of my power, he added, "Stay here too, and I am happy." But the words were so fluttering that at the moment I attached but little importance to them. When all was over, I felt, as my be supposed, very desolate, but not quite as much so as would have been the case had my home been with my grandfather; and no doubt it was in anticipation of the event of his death, which he felt could not be very distant, that he had never proposed my making my residence at the Parsonage, except in case of some unforeseen necessity. Happily no such need had occurred, nor was it apparently likely so as to make my old home an impossible habitation for me.

We had settled down in tolerable peace and harmony there at last. My brother Piers continued to afford me the means of contributing my mite to the family purse, whilst I was able to reserve a small residue for my private expenses. At the same time I was

given to understand from our lawyer, Mr. Jackson, who paid me my half-yearly pittance, that my brother's affairs were far from flourishing, either in India or in England. He wrote to me himself occasionally, but since his marriage his letters had become few and far between, and he ceased to talk of returning home.

Thus it seemed as if I was becoming more and more isolated in my family surroundings. It does not follow, however, whatever may be asserted by some people, that step-mothers and step-daughters must needs live in a state of natural hostility and antipathy. Mrs. Markham had begun to tolerate me very amiably, and, as I have said, she had no wish to be unkind. During my father's lifetime she had indulged a species of jealousy in regard to me, arising from her knowledge of his deep affection for the children of his first wife. After that had passed away, with the exciting cause, and she became assured I should be no burden on her own straitened

income, her sentiments sank into passive indifference: but during the period of her intense apathy in regard to everything around her, that was hardly to be wondered at. Since she had began to revive and resume her former occupations, we had become more friendly, and the relations between us were by no means unpleasant. She found me useful, and I was glad to be so. She no longer grudged me a place in my father's home, and seemed quite inclined to treat me like her own daughter Juliet. In fact, she paid me the compliment of declaring that when she had anything particular to do, she had rather employ me: Juliet was too much given to sermonize and take her own way.

Thus, by imperceptible degrees, my stepmother and I had become tolerably good friends. She sympathised with me, as much as was in her nature, on the loss I had sustained; and as she began to speak of the destination of the living, I told her what my grandfather's last request had been. I found

a few days after that the subject had been duly discussed with her friend, the doctor, and he had imparted to her a piece of gossip which bore upon the subject. It was no less than that he had been informed, from very good authority, that Dean Elton intended to ask the living for his son Cyril of Mr. Crofton.

When Miss Ramsay heard this, she begged me not to interfere in the matter, as she had some idea that Mr. Cyril was inclined to admire Juliet, and that being the case, it would be just the thing for him to get the vacant living, if Mr. Crofton would give it to him.

I was obliged, however unpleasant to my feelings, in every way to place myself in an opposition to Miss Ramsay's views of the matter. Thus I simply told her I had given my promise to my grandfather on his death-bed, and I must be guided by his wishes, though I had no desire to interfere in the matter.

"Well," said Miss Ramsay. "I suppose

you must keep your promise; but Mr. Crofton is not more likely to oblige you than other people. I like to do everything openly and above board, so if Juliet wishes Mr. Cyril Elton to have it, I will write myself to Mr. Crofton. One letter may be as good as another, and Juliet is his daughter's particular friend. Here, Juliet, please come here and tell us which you think ought to have this living."

On it being further explained to Juliet, she flushed up indignantly and exclaimed,

"*Who* ought, indeed? Oh! aunt, how can you ask? No one can have a right or a claim except Luke Dillon."

CHAPTER VI.

MY letter to Mr. Crofton was written at last, but it was not till a full month after my grandfather's death that I found spirits or courage for the undertaking. After it was gone I tormented myself as to the reception it might meet with, and the answer it would elicit. I quite trembled as I thought of the arrival of that letter. What if Mr. Crofton might resent as a liberty the attempt to dictate to him on whom he should bestow the living my grandfathar had so long possessed, it having been given to him by our friend's father. My interference in the matter might appear to imply a claim on my own part to his consideration, or, at all events,

to infer that as our family had held it so long, we began to think we had a right to continue to do so. I knew my friend was often so peculiar in his views that he might take my request in the simple bearing of the case, passing by all extraneous circumstances. Thus I felt, though I had endeavoured to show cause *why* I had taken the liberty of asking him to confer the vacant living on my cousin (having been made to promise I would do so by my grandfather on his death-bed); yet I knew if Mr. Crofton were disposed to resent the application he would attach no weight to my explanation, only considering whether I had been presuming in making the request at all.

With such reflection I managed to torture my imagination for the few days succeeding that on which my letter had been sent. I pictured him in the various moods in which I had seen him when anything had occurred to disturb his serenity. I fancied him reading my poor letter, and laying it down with a

look of contempt, and then sitting down to reply to it. Of course it would be worded civilly, but I should detect the latent feeling of resentment, even in the few smooth phrases in which the refusal might be conveyed. I might be wronging my friend, nevertheless I felt, although he might consider I had no business to make the demand, yet there was a powerful motive that had induced me, and that I was compelled to do so.

After I had come to this last conclusion I tried to dismiss the subject from my mind, and to think no more about it, till the time came for me to expect an answer to my letter. We were tolerably *au fait* at the movement of the Croftons from Claude, who wrote once a month at least, to his patron, and heard from him about as often. From Mary I had letters at intervals, telling me of their travels, and anything she thought might interest me in the course of them. From Mr. Crofton himself I had received two precious letters since they had been absent.

They were clever, pleasant letters, relating entirely to things and places, with graphic sketches of what they had seen and done, but nothing of what he had thought or felt, nor even of the people whom he had been meeting —like his conversation, which was generally of things and not of persons.

A day or two after I had come to the wise conclusion that I would think no more about my letter, I was told, as I was preparing to go out one morning, that my cousin Luke was waiting to see me in the dining-room. It was, then, to be a private interview, it seemed. We had only met a time or two since the day we parted in the house of death. I supposed he was come to speak to me on the subject of the vacant living, possibly to take upon himself to absolve me from a promise made solely with a view to his own benefit, and which he was the last person in world to take advantage of. I was, therefore, rather glad my letter, such as it was, was

gone—there could be no further question as to the expediency of sending it.

It was a fine spring day, and Luke was standing in one of the deep recessed windows, looking very intently at the landscape without. Luke Dillon was not to me a prepossessing person. I knew he was a good man, but nevertheless I should have been very sorry had it been my lot to live always in his presence. Still, on the present occasion, I looked at him with more favourable feelings, as connected in my mind with past scenes and associations. Luke heard me come in, and came forward to meet me with rather more *empressement* than usual, saying,

"Cousin Marian, I wished to be the first to tell you, unless you are, as is possibly the case, already informed."

"No, Luke," said I, as we shook hands, "I have heard nothing. I have written to Mr. Crofton, according to our grandfather's last request, but there has not been time for an answer yet."

"That was very good of you, cousin, for, strictly speaking, I hardly know whether you might not have been excused from so doing."

"Never mind now, Luke, the letter is gone, and I only hope you may be successful."

"Do you, indeed? Well, I can only say I never expected the letter I have received this morning from Mr. Crofton."

"What, has he written to you without any solicitation on your part, Luke?" said I, my heart giving a great bound of dismay as I thought of my letter. "And what *does* he say? Anything about giving you the living?"

"I brought his letter for you to see. Perhaps you will read it, cousin?"

I took the letter, and did as Luke desired; and then I was filled with compunction at all the misgivings and hard thoughts I had entertained in regard to this true friend and generous-hearted man. The living was in-

deed offered to Luke by Mr. Crofton as one requesting a favour, instead of bestowing it. I had never thought half so highly of Luke as I did at that moment. It surprised me, too, to see that Mr. Crofton, who had said so little about my cousin, had yet been so observant of his conduct as a clergyman, and his general character. The hard-working, self-denying, earnest curate, had been not only remarked but duly appreciated, and now as opportunely rewarded.

"I hardly like you to read all that Mr. Crofton kindly says about me," observed Luke, "though I wish you to see his letter, because I hope it will give you pleasure that our grandfather's views will be so fully carried out in thus appointing me in his place. Besides that, the kind and Christian spirit in which Mr. Crofton has done it reflects credit on himself. At the same time, I feel he has overrated my poor endeavours in the good work; but I hope I shall strive to act up to his expectations."

"Don't strive, Luke, 'to wind yourself too high'—that is the danger with you, I think," I said, smiling.

Luke only shook his head gravely.

"Ah! cousin, you can little tell how short I fall of all I wish and desire to be and do."

If I was pleased at Luke's appointment to the living of Heathfield, Juliet was delighted. I saw there was indeed no shade of a question in her mind which of the two, Mr. Cyril Elton or my cousin Luke, was the most worthy of receiving the desired appointment; and when I witnessed the look of intense gratification with which she received the news of his good fortune, it struck me forcibly that there might be henceforth no obstacle to prevent two young people who were so entirely of the same mind from passing their lives there together.

I did not know whether Luke had ever thought of Juliet as his wife—possibly not; for whilst he was a curate, the idea of marry-

ing would have been madness on his part; especially Juliet, who had not, and might never have, a sixpence of her own. But now, with their self-denying habits and frugal tastes and desires, the living would supply all their wants, and leave a something for their poorer neighbours, no doubt—the larger half of all their small possessions.

It was early days no doubt for Luke to think of proposing upon his new appointment, but I hoped for Juliet's sake the day might not be far distant, for I saw more plainly than ever that unknown to herself she had given her heart to Luke Dillon, and became daily more devoted to the life she knew it was both his duty and delight to lead. Now that he was settled amongst us for good, Juliet gave all her time and thoughts to the furtherance of every plan and undertaking set on foot by the young Rector.

It did not appear to me, however, as time went on, and I had more opportunities for observation, that Luke seemed to respond to

the feelings Juliet entertained for him—at least (though he no doubt appreciated all her kind exertions) he never seemed to feel how much was done on his own account, nor to regard my young sister with any return of tenderness: at the same time, he encouraged her in all her good works, and seemed always glad to direct her in their performance: but it was done much in the same way that it would have been to a young and zealous curate who might have been under his special direction.

I often wondered whether Juliet was aware of this seeming indifference towards herself, and whether she was satisfied to be his fellow-worker, to aid and abet him in every useful undertaking: never perhaps suspecting the master motive in her own heart, or seeking for a return on his part. I sometimes doubted whether Luke had any affection to bestow on any one, so singularly cold and undemonstrative was he in domestic life.

I believed that he had loved our grand-

father with as warm a regard as his nature was capable of; and he also had testified a sort of cousinly liking for myself. But whether he were capable of a warmer love for Juliet, or any other woman, seemed very hard to determine.

At length, accidentally as it were, I was fated to be enlightened on that point. He had been in possession of the living of Heathfield nearly three months (for there was nothing to prevent his immediate succession on Mr. Crofton's early presentation), and had worked early and late in the more distant hamlet—which had been lately attached by the Bishop of the diocese to the incumbency—also in doing many things which my grandfather's years and failing strength had prevented his undertaking, or Luke's even liking to propose to the old man. Juliet was a great help at that time in looking after the home parish—in fact, doing some days almost everything but preach for him. She held the classes, taught in the evening as well as morning

schools, instructed the musical part of the population, and would have done more on the days of Luke's absence, had I not given her my mite of help in looking after the sick people, and reading to such as cared to listen to me.

My share in the parish work, however, was very small, and many days often passed without my taking any part in it. Luke often came to our house at that time, chiefly, I believed, to inquire what we had done; and no doubt his own home was dreary enough, now he was left alone in it.

One evening he came over rather late; our dinner-hour was long passed, and I was strolling in the garden, half hoping that Claude would come and give us a look that evening, and bring some tidings from the Croftons, of whom we had not heard for a long time. Sometimes we did not see Claude for days together. He had his own rooms at the Hall, and there he chiefly resided during the master's absence, such being Mr. Crofton's

wish. He had also many engagements in the neighbourhood, for Claude was a popular person wherever he was known; so with one thing and another, between business and pleasure, there was not much time left to bestow on the home circle.

On this evening I was, however, watching for him, for he had told me a few days before he expected his foreign letter, which sometimes enclosed a scrap for my own benefit; so, leaving the two elder ladies in the sitting-room, I strolled out, hoping to meet and talk to him by himself. I soon heard the welcome sound of a tramp upon the gravel, following the click of the little gate that opened at the end of our shrubbery walk. The tread was too measured, however, for Claude, so I felt sure it was not his, and the next moment Luke came in sight. It was early in June then, but it was past eight o'clock, so the light was mellowing down into twilight when my cousin appeared. I could see, however, that he looked glad to meet

me there, but he merely said a quiet, "Good evening—all alone, cousin?"

"Yes, Juliet is gone to bed. She was so tired, she had to make an early retreat. I was expecting Claude to walk over from the Hall, so came here to meet him."

"I do not think you are likely to see him this evening: he is, I heard, one of the eleven playing in the match against the Thorpe men."

"Oh! then he will be at the Deanery, of course. Why do not you play cricket, Luke?—it would do you good, after all your hard work. You ought to have a little play sometimes."

"Thank you, Cousin Marian, I have quite as much recreation as a country parson needs."

"Indeed!—in what way do you amuse yourself, Luke, when you are so inclined?"

"Oh! in many ways that suit me better than cricket; for instance, I am enjoying recreation now."

"Indeed! I fear it is not a very lively kind. I wish Juliet had been here; she would have helped amuse you."

"I regret to hear she is so tired," was all the answer.

"Yes, poor girl, tired to death, with such a bad headache. She could not sit up any longer, so they both sent her to bed."

"Indeed!—I am sorry to hear it," repeated Luke, with such an unmoved aspect, that I said, rather warmly—

"Really, Luke, you ought to be very much obliged to poor Juliet for all the trouble she takes."

"I am sure," returned my cousin, "every person in this parish ought to be, for Miss Juliet is constantly employed in their service."

"Yes, but don't you see it is *you* that impose so much upon the poor girl. She is anxious to do all she can, and by your advice, and to help *you*, she does more."

"Does she indeed?" said Luke, in a musing

voice. "I never asked her to do my work, but when she begged to be employed for the good of others, surely it was not for me to quench the good spirit that craved such employment."

"All that is very well, to a certain extent; but Juliet has been doing too much, and all she has done in the parish is under your guidance."

"Exactly. No doubt I have directed her labours, but the measure and extent of them I left, of course, wholly to herself."

We then walked slowly along in the sweet summer twilight, and I thought how strange an infatuation it was on Juliet's part to work so hard, for so impractible a person as Luke Dillon, but I held my peace till he spoke again.

"I should be sorry you thought me to blame in this matter, Cousin Marian; but my belief is, if I were to try and dissuade her from the good work she has set herself to do in this life, she would not heed me, nor

should I like to take upon myself so great so solemn a responsibility."

"Nonsense, Luke, it is very well to teach, and even to preach (I am speaking of young ladies) in moderation, but not to neglect every other earthly thing for it, as you have induced Juliet to do."

Why I spoke so pettishly to the poor man I could not have explained, I had really the highest opinion of my cousin Luke, but there was no one provoked me so much at times as he did. I liked him a thousand times better when he was absent, than I ever could bring myself to do when he was present and I listened to his conversation; it was strange, perhaps—for I liked his preaching, I even admired his practice, but his little formal, cold way of talking too often irritated me. And to think of Juliet desiring—as I felt sure she did—to pass her whole life seeing and hearing him! Well, it is *good* indeed we do not all see with the same eyes, and hear with the same ears! Such were my thoughts, and

I felt very indifferent as to what my companion's might be. At last he spoke, quite in a humble and supplicating tone,

"I hope I have not displeased you, cousin."

"Oh,—not at all, Luke; I have no business to be pleased or displeased on the occasion, only I don't think you are considerate enough about my sister: you know she attaches great importance to what a clergyman advises—she did to the opinion of our dear grandfather, and would work for what she calls the Church till she dropped: you could easily restrain her a little."

"Anything you desire is—is—I will not say '*sacred*' to me, but I should wish to please you if I could in that and everything else."

"Well, tell Juliet not to go to the evening-school to-morrow, that knocks her up more than anything."

"Will you come in her place, cousin?"

"No, I will not, Luke; I have no talent for

teaching, and you can do sometimes without either of us."

"Oh, yes, I can, but it seems to me that it is a good and serviceable work for yourselves."

"Many thanks," I returned laughing; "the truth is, I have things at home to do very often, and if we both went out it would be hard upon Mrs. Markham, to say nothing of Miss Ramsay."

"Yes, I see—always thougtful for others, and doing a woman's true work, staying at home and helping to guide the house."

I laughed again at Luke's quaint phraseology.

"Then why don't you advise Juliet to do the same."

"Her vocation seems to lie in another direction; we have all a diversity of gifts; I am glad cousin that yours is such as you describe."

"I do not see that my gifts, as you call them, are so much your concern, as those

which tends more to parochial work, and that I am very ready to leave to you."

I can hardly describe my astonishment, when I felt my hand gently taken and detained in my cousin Luke's, whilst he answered in a voice of evidently repressed emotion,

"Do not be angry with me, cousin, I must speak: you have raised up such a vision of joy in those few words—you would leave the parish to me, and yourself stay at home and guide the house! Oh, do let it be *my* house! and you my own dear wife in it; our grandfather asked you to stay in it—yes, with me! he knew I loved you—have always loved you, but I could not ask you to share my poverty; but now I have a home, will you dear—dear Marian, share it with me?"

What my reply was may well be imagined: nor have I a very clear recollection of the words in which my refusal was couched, I tried to render it as palatable as possible, but was not very successful at the time, and it was a real

distress and regret to me for some time after, to find that Luke Dillon had far more feeling than I had given him credit for, especially since it had taken such a perverse direction.

CHAPTER VII.

JULIET never knew from me what had passed that day between Luke Dillon and myself. He made no perceptible difference in his behaviour, and came occasionally, as I begged he would, to our house. I believe he accepted it in the light of a penance, and was therefore content to submit to any pain he might incur in so doing. If he looked a little graver and more preoccupied than he had done before, Juliet only set it down to the increasing pressure of his many self-imposed duties, and no one else took the trouble of observing or accounting for it.

Every one was not as insensible to Juliet's

many merits as my cousin Luke, for about that time Mr. Cyril Elton began to come frequently to our house. It was in the long summer days, and people who were so inclined made parties and visited at each other's houses. Cyril Elton had, however, of late, turned a good deal from such vanities, and given himself up to follow my cousin Luke's example, and became more intimate with him. He was a gentle, rather timid person, very different from Luke, and he found it somewhat difficult to keep up to his mark. Still, he was zealous in his way, and he was really desirous to become a hard-working clergyman. He was, besides, very fond of church music, and anxious to improve the choir in his church. All this brought about a considerable degree of intimacy between him and Juliet, with whose appearance and conversation he had been much and favourably impressed the preceding summer.

After a few weeks of marked attention, Cyril Elton, with the entire approbation of

his family, wrote and proposed to my sister Juliet. Here was a fresh instance of the perversity of human nature—its fancies and likings! Juliet would have nothing to say to the gentle curate—at least in the way he wished.

Both Mrs. Markham and Miss Alethea were fully inclined to advocate the young man's cause, but Juliet declared nothing would induce her to accept him. She protested he was far too undecided a character for her, and that she could not endure the idea of having to lead a husband, which she somewhat presumptuously decided would be the case were she ever to become the wife of Mr. Cyril Elton. It was but too evident that the strong-minded, indomitable Juliet looked with contempt upon her would-be suitor.

Mrs. Markham would have been glad to have cemented her friendship with the Dean's family by a marriage between his son and her daughter. The young man was sure of preferment in due time, and he was perfectly

unobjectionable in appearance, character, and disposition.

However, it was not to be. Juliet seemed rather glad of the opportunity thus afforded of testifying her indifference to any worldly advantages. It would not have been a very brilliant match, to be sure, but an extremely desirable one for a girl in Juliet's position, and with few advantages of person or fortune.

Mrs. Markham did not press the matter when she found how strongly her daughter had set herself against it. She knew by experience how little chance she had of prevailing in any contest, especially one that concerned Juliet so nearly. Mrs. Markham had already begun to bend before the stronger will of her young daughter. She complained plaintively that Juliet's obstinacy had broken up her pleasant intimacy with the only people she cared for in the neighbourhood, and she thought Juliet had behaved very ill in encouraging the young man's coming, and pretending to

like him, that she might have the satisfaction of refusing him. Miss Ramsay contented herself with telling Juliet she would repent when it was too late of having refused her first offer, for she should not be at all surprised if it were her last.

Juliet listened to all these remarks with an air of lofty indifference. She had stated her objections, and there was no more to be said about it. The only time I saw her listen with any attention to her mother's remarks about Mr. Elton's proposal was on her coming suddenly into the room whilst Luke was there one day, and to my annoyance Mrs. Markham was confiding the story of her daughter's perversity and refusal of his friend. I saw the steadfast Luke look rather uneasy, recalling, no doubt, his own late experiences in that way, which he must, however, have seen were quite unsuspected in that quarter. Juliet glanced eagerly towards Luke as her mother waited for his reply, whilst she tried to look quite unconscious as to the subject

she knew had been under discussion. He said,

"I am sorry you should have been vexed and disappointed, but I think, in such cases, those most nearly concerned are the best judges of what is for their own happiness; and—and as for the man, why, he must live it down—a little resolution will soon enable him to bear what is inevitable."

Luke looked towards me as if he thus wished me to understand he was quite resigned in his own case. I heard Juliet's triumphant murmur of,

"True, true, quite true! Will and resolution can do anything!"

After Cyril Elton's refusal we had a very quiet, not to say dull time, for a few weeks, for all the family held aloof. Mrs. Markham took it so much to heart that she fancied herself quite ill, and Mr. Jones, who had not been called in for some time, was again sent for. My step-mother revived wonderfully under the combined influence of his medical and mental treatment. The pleasing stimulus of

a little daily gentle gossip seemed almost as efficacious as all the iron and quinine draughts that were also administered. By degrees she ceased to mourn over Juliet's perversity of disposition, and entered with renewed zest into the discussion of topics of wider concern. There were at that time, too, events of far deeper interest looming dimly in the distance, and as they gradually approached, unfolding by degrees, they afforded subject for all-engrossing speculation and consideration in our little circle.

Our neighbours were at length about to return home. It was August when Claude brought the tidings that they might be expected about a week after the receipt of that letter. It was dated from Paris. About six weeks before that Mary had written to me from Geneva; they had then been a fortnight or more in Switzerland, and were intending to stay some weeks longer, moving from place to place. She spoke for the first time then of their having met Lord Ramsay

during the Easter week in Rome, and that he was then at Geneva.

"We saw very little of him at Rome," said Mary's letter, "for Keene had decided on leaving soon a day or two before we met, and the *rencontre* I think rather quickened than retarded his movements. Lord Ramsay seemed pleased to meet us again, and I could see was again inclined to be captivated by Flora, who is, as you may suppose, very much admired. Keene's pride, however, took the alarm, and he did not facilitate any meetings during the short time we remained in Rome. We left without giving Lord Ramsay any clue as to our future movements, and I considered the matter ended. I did not even tell you in my letter at that time that we had seen Lord Ramsay. However, here we are all together again, and have been for the last fortnight. We are staying in the town, but he—Lord Ramsay—is on a visit with a charming aunt of his, a Lady Percival, at a lovely château belonging to a

relation of theirs. The whole party have sought to make our acquaintance in the most flattering way possible and we cannot but respond graciously. Lady Percival—by the way, the lady with whom you were so taken when staying in London, and who seems to have a very pleasant recollection of you—is, I think, the most fascinating woman I ever met. I see she is charmed with Keene, and looks at Flora as if she were contemplating some exquisite picture; but the child is always monopolised by the nephew, naturally to the exclusion of the aunt. I see Lady Percival perfectly worships the said nephew, he is quite like a son to her. I never liked Lord Ramsay so much before: he is charming in his own family. He tells me he was here last year, just after his father's death. Count Rocca and his wife are as nice in their way. He is an Italian of very old family and large fortune. She is English, and a niece of Lady Percival's. They spend some month's every year at this

sweet place. They have generally a great deal of society about them, as well as pleasant people from all nations staying in the house. So you see we are well amused, for their hospitality is unbounded. How it will all end time will show."

After that letter I heard no more till Claude came to announce their return. I had seen very little of my brother in the interim—and when I did see him, I looked at him with ill-concealed anxiety. I feared, I hardly knew what—but it was only for his peace of mind—at the same time hoping that all might be well there, and that time and absence had done their good work, and that what was clearly impending would complete it. I never doubted but that Flora would accept Lord Ramsay. In fact, from Mary's letter, I felt sure she was on the direct road to do so. Why she did not write again and tell me that all was settled, I could not imagine. It was hardly like Mary Crofton to have said so much, and then reveal no more. Of course

the contents of this letter oosed out by degrees—it was too interesting to keep to myself, and was, no doubt, intended for the benefit of others as well—Juliet and Claude especially. I was very sure Flora was all but engaged, or Mary would never have written so openly upon the subject. Mr. Crofton on his part made no sign, but I did not expect it in the least from him. I had received a kind reply to my petitioning letter, coming soon after the petition had been so fully answered, and that was the last communication.

He then said but little on the subject of my letter—only that he was glad he had forestalled my request; the having done so would, no doubt, be most satisfactory to all parties; and for himself it was an additional gratification that, in acting as he had done, he was fulfilling the last wish of one he so entirely liked and respected, as his late valued friend and Rector.

He did not enter on the subject of Luke's fitness to fill his place, or anything else con-

nected with the bestowal of the living; all that had already been said in the best way to Luke himself, and Mr. Crofton was not given to vain repetitions. After that, all was silent on his part in the way of correspondence; and, as I have said, Mary Crofton's interesting communication was followed by a blank of six weeks' duration.

Claude heard all I had to tell him on the subject, and quietly said he hoped all would be settled as Mr. Crofton could desire before their return home.

"There can be no doubt about it now, Claude," I replied with as much decision as I could command; but he made no answer. I asked therefore,

"Surely you must think all Mary says looks very like an engagement between Flora and Lord Ramsay?"

"Very like?—yes! but so it did before—I mean when they were at Stornbay together. I hope he won't play fast and loose again in that way?"

I ventured to assure Claude there was no chance of it this time.

"No," replied he, "Mr. Crofton is too watchful over his daughter's happiness to allow it, with his knowledge, at least."

The day week after the first letter came a second from Mr. Crofton. Claude brought it over; I was alone at the time, it was early in the day, but Mrs. Markham and her sister were gone over for a long day's shopping to Thorpe. They were to rest and refresh themselves at Mr. Jones's house, and little Miss Jones was gone over in a fever of expectation and preparation to meet them, and do the honours of her brother's house. She was deeply impressed with a sense of the favour that was about to be shown to him; and I had no doubt the luncheon got ready on the occasion would be the most *recherché* that could be supplied for the refreshment of the two honourable and condescending ladies.

They were not likely to return till a late

dinner, and Juliet being absent on her parochial occupations, I had all the morning to myself. I should not say to myself, however, as I had a long task set me, in seeing about the tying down and labelling of a large batch of preserves, duly concocted by our old servant. The tying down had been successfully accomplished, and I then had the various jars brought into the sitting-room to write upon them at my leisure there.

It was a hot morning, and the door into the garden stood open, and through that Claude entered. I was busy, bending over my task, and hardly noticed my brother at first, though I knew he had come in. He threw himself onto the large old-fashioned couch opposite the table where I sat, and tossing a note on the table, said,

"There, I came up myself to bring it—I thought you would like to see it."

I took the letter—it was written the pre-

vious day from London, and was from Mr. Crofton.

"DEAR CLAUDE,

"We hope to get down to dinner at eight to-morrow. Kindly send the carriage for us to Thorpe station. Tell Mrs. Hunter to prepare rooms for Lord Ramsay—he comes with us. *That* tells its own tale. And you will, I hope, stay to meet him, and all of us.

"Yours affectionately,

"K. CROFTON."

So it was all settled, and no one had cared to write and tell us. I felt half inclined to be indignant, for, like many other people, I had not at that time learned to put myself, and the effect of an event on my own individual feelings, quite in the background. My only comment was to remark in a stiff tone,

"Well, I suppose they wished to take us by surprise. You have not had much time for preparation."

"You forget I heard from Mr. Crofton a week ago, saying he would be home as to-day. Mrs. Hunter has been busy all the week. Everything will be quite ready when they arrive this evening."

Claude spoke steadily and gently, and yet there was a something in his tone that made me look up hastily at him. He was leaning back, with one hand supporting his head, and looking dreamily out of the window. He was very pale, and there was an expression of weariness and depression on his countenance that roused in my heart a sensation of most tender pity. He had ridden over, to save time, and having been also in another direction before he came to us, and his whip lay listlessly in his disengaged hand. In my foolish zeal, I got up to comfort him, instead of letting the mood pass away, as I ought to have done; and then I stood by him,

smoothing the beautiful hair back from his pale forehead, and saying—

"How tired you look, Claudy, dear."

"Yes—I was up early. I had business at the Craggs, and was there by seven this morning, that's all. Never mind me, Minnie, go on with all that sweet trash. I did not mean to hinder you."

"Never mind, it will be all done in time," said I, seating myself on the arm of the sofa close by, and then asking, "And will you dine there to-night, and meet this—this——"

"This bridegroom elect?—Lord Ramsay? Of course I am expected to do so? Why should not I?"

"Oh! I think engaged people are so tiresome!" said I, knowing so much on the subject.

"Well, I have not had extended experience myself; but I suppose Mr. Crofton and his sister are not engaged?"

"No, that is not likely," I returned; "but

do not you think they might have let us know a little sooner."

"I don't see that it would have made much difference," replied Claude, listlessly. Then, after a few moments, he added, sitting up and speaking cheerfully, "Well, I suppose it has taken us all by surprise, or I should not have been such an ungrateful donkey as never to have wished them joy in my heart; but I have been living at my ease in his house, till it seems I think no one has a right to come into it without consulting me beforehand."

"Nonsense, Claude," said I, with the tears almost coming into my eyes as I saw the inward struggle of the poor boy's heart, and felt what it would cost him to keep up his assumed gaiety for some weeks to come; and then a sudden thought struck me, and without a moment's reflection I said hastily, "Claude, you are looking ill—you seem harrassed and worried. I am sure all the charge you have had upon your hands in Mr. Crofton's

absence has been too much for you. Now, take my advice, like a dear Claude as you are, and give yourself a little holiday now—you can do it easily now Mr. Crofton is come back; and with all this tiresome love affair going on, if I were you I should make myself scarce."

And then I paused, quite pleased with myself for having, as I fancied, opened a door through which Claude might make his escape, and no one be the wiser as to the reason why. I was surprised, however, to see Claude knit his brow when I had done, and then look up in unfeigned surprise, as I bent over him. At last he said,

"What on earth do you mean, Minnie? What can possess you to imagine I should wish to do as you propose? What! ask to run away the instant Mr. Crofton returns after his long absence, when he must want me, or my services, so particularly. A pretty return for all his generous trust and confidence while he was away; and then to say

I am tired and ill from overwork! As if I could be such a precious sneak as that!—to get out of the way—what of?—seeing other people's happiness? I must be a nice fellow when I do that! What have you seen in me, Marian, to make you think me such a contemptible ass?"

"Don't be angry with me, Claude," said I, humbly, for I felt quite ashamed of my proposition, as my brother spoke up so bravely and so well that he almost reassured me in so doing; whilst I begged him to think no more of my foolish speech. The only excuse was, I pleaded anxiety on his account.

Then Claude changed his tone in a moment, and was full of concern for having spoken roughly to me; but I was not sorry on the whole, for it gave me a confidence in him which I had not before. It was a comfort to think that if there was trouble before him, he was prepared to meet it boldly and overcome it.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE news I had to impart was well received by both the ladies, on their return from the shopping excursion that evening; nor was Juliet, in her quiet way, less disposed to be satisfied with the marriage in prospect between Flora Crofton and Lord Ramsay. They were all glad to receive Flora as a connection. Miss Alethea frankly gave it as her opinion that, in consequence of such a match, their own relations with her nephew would be more firmly established, saying—

"If he had married into Lady Percival's set, as no doubt she wished him to do, why, we might all have said good-bye to Ramsay, as far as ever seeing anything more of him might go; but *now* I hope both he and his

wife will be a great deal amongst us; and Flora Crofton, being such a particular friend of Juliet's, I daresay she will be asked to stay with them in London, and that will be a great advantage to her in every way."

Juliet entirely disclaimed all participation in her aunt's projects for her individual benefit, and to turn the conversation, asked her mother after her friend, Miss Jones, and how they had got on in Thorpe.

"Much better than I expected," said Mrs. Markham, with emphasis, "for I had no idea I should have been made so comfortable, when I promised to go and lunch at the Jones's. On former occasions, when I have gone to Thorpe for a day's shopping, I always called at the Deanery and had luncheon there—in fact, it was an understood thing that I was to make it my *pièd à terre* for the day, and very nice and pleasant I used to find it; but *now*" (with a steady gaze at poor Juliet)—"*now*, thanks to some people's strange behaviour, that house is closed to

me, and I can go there no longer, so I was glad to get anywhere to rest and find something to eat."

"I am glad you found it so comfortable, mamma: but I daresay Mrs. Elton would have been just as glad to have seen you and Aunt Alethea, if you had chosen to have called on her as usual."

"But I *could* not do it *as usual*," replied her mother, in cutting accents, "thanks to you, Juliet, as I say I have lost my best friends. However, I do not wish to complain; the Jones's gave us a very nice luncheon—everything they could think of. I told them it was quite a dinner; and there was a pretty bit of garden at the back of the house, where we sat and had coffee before we came away."

"And is it a nice house, mamma?" asked Juliet, trying to keep her mother to her pleasant reminiscences, instead of her reproachful ones.

"Much nicer than I expected. Miss Jones

showed us all over it. It is quite an old-fashioned house, roomy and comfortable. She told me her father lived there before his son, and that both she and her brother were born in that same house, so it sounded quite respectable."

"Yes," said Miss Alethea, in her turn, "everything in and about the place looked highly respectable—nothing new or fashionable, of course—that was not to be expected, and would have been quite out of character. I am glad we went; it seemed to give so much pleasure, and both the doctor and his sister begged us so much always to go there, and make any use of the house we like, whenever we want to do some shopping."

"Well, well, it is all very well now and then," said my step-mother, with dignity. "But it is not *Miss* Jones's house, but her brother, the doctor's, so I should not choose to repeat the visit very soon, for, of course, everybody in Thorpe will be talking about our going there."

"Dear mamma," said Juliet, "I should not think it concerned anyone but you and Aunt Alethea, besides Miss Jones and her brother."

"Never mind what *you* think, Juliet—I know much better what people in general think than you can do, and I mean what I say," said her mother testily; then, turning the conversation into another channel, she remarked—"I suppose we must all go over to the Hall to-morrow to wish Flora joy, and congratulate Mr. Crofton."

There was no demur to this proposition; all present agreed that it would be right and proper so to do: and talking chiefly on that subject the rest of the evening, there was happily, no farther sparring between Juliet and her mother; as was but too frequently the case when some subjects came into discussion between them.

Before we could put our design into execution, the next morning, we were prevented by seeing the two gentlemen from the Hall, Mr.

Crofton and Lord Ramsay, coming up to the house to call on us.

It was the longest absence Mr. Crofton had ever made since he came into the neighbourhood; and very pleasant was it to see the well remembered figure of our friend once more approaching our house. He was always cool and imperturbable in speech and manner, and showed little more *empressement* on meeting us than if we had all parted the preceding week.

Perhaps there might have been a warmer pressure in the hand, that now went the round of our little circle in kindly greeting, or I fancied it in my own case. Lord Ramsay was of course greeted with a warm welcome from his two aunts, and received their congratulations with natural and becoming expressions of satisfaction.

"Yes," said Mr. Crofton in his turn, in reply to the good wishes so abundantly bestowed—"Yes, we knew you would take a most kindly interest in our proceedings, so we came at once to receive your congratulations,

and return thanks for the same. The ladies are waiting at home to receive their share. I daresay you will be kindly going over to see them soon."

Mrs. Markham then told him that we were on the very point of setting off for his house: but perhaps we had better call another day, as they had had the pleasure of seeing him and Lord Ramsay.

"By no means," said Mr. Crofton. "Mary and Flora will be only too glad to see you all. We did not come ungraciously to prevent you in that sense of the word. I suppose you and Miss Ramsay will drive over."

"Yes, the carriage is ordered at three?"

"Well, it is nearly that time now, so I vote that the young ladies who, I presume, intend walking, accept of Mr. Ramsay and me as their escort, and we will start as soon as it suits them to get ready."

There was no demur to this plan. I thought it a very pleasant one, and Juliet, who was prepared to sacrifice the afternoon to friend-

ship, was also in readiness, so we set off at once on our walk to the Hall.

At first we all kept together, but as the path became narrower, Lord Ramsay and Juliet dropped behind, he naturally felt more interest in her, both as his cousin and as the especial friend of his *fiancèe*, whilst Mr. Crofton and I continued our talk and our walk, without regretting it had become a *tête-à-tête*.

"Well," said he, as he stopped to open a gate and held it back till I had passed through, casting a look at the loiterers in the background—"Well, I hope you are prepared with a very large stock of good wishes and congratulations, and have not exhausted them all before we started."

I assured him my good wishes were not so easily exhausted, and that I had a whole budget to bestow on Flora when we met.

"That is satisfactory," said he, "as you can give her half and bestow the other in another direction."

"What for?" asked I.

"Oh, only another marriage in prospect."

As he said this quietly, and I fancied rather sadly, a strange feeling took possession of my heart as it echoed his words. Another marriage! and whose? Surely it must be himself and no other; and yet I dared not say the word that would have confirmed my conjecture. Oh, was it indeed possible! and then I must lose my friend, my only valued friend! I never felt how valued till that moment. I was silent, sorrow-stricken, and yet feeling the unreasonableness of that sorrow so strongly, that I did not venture to trust my voice, lest it might betray me.

And so we walked on, silently and sadly, whilst I turned over in my mind all the chances and probabilities as to *who* it might be. What woman could have been gifted enough to have won him from his misanthropical distrust of all her sex? No one had been ever named as intimate with the Croftons till that last letter six weeks ago, when Mary wrote from Geneva and said they were seeing so many

charming people at the Château of their friends, the Count and Countess Rocca. And did not that strange ominous silence confirm my suspicion, that this new acquaintance must have dated from that time? I stole a look at my companion, fearing he might think me wanting in good feeling in thus receiving his intelligence. He was plodding along, his eyes cast on the ground, his lips compressed with stern determination. He was evidently not thinking of me; whatever his thoughts were, they were for some absent one. At length he said, as if rousing himself from a dream,

"Yes, another marriage! it seems strange, does it not? We shall all miss her—but she ought to be happy at last dear, good, unselfish Mary!"

"What, your sister Mary? is it possible? I never dreamt of her marrying!"

"No—no one thinks of her, I suppose, because she never thinks of herself; even now she would have given it all up—and we have had hard work to persuade her

to consent to be happy herself—and make him so at last."

"Who?"

"Oh, the same. Mary has had but one lover all her life, Sir Edward Manwairing, and he married some years ago. We met him at the Roccas'; he has been a widower some three or four years; he has one little girl whom he doats upon– a nice little thing she is. Mary will make a model step-mother: and that is all the history, I think. I fear poor Manwairing is sadly out of health, but that was all in his favour; she can nurse him, and take care of his child, and finding how useful she might make herself, at last she consented to take him."

"And you?"

"Well, I have no right to complain, Mary has been very good to me, in the same way taking care of my child; and now it seems someone else is going to take charge of her, so her occupation is gone. Oh, believe me, I strongly advocated Sir Edward

Manwairing's cause, and showed Mary I did not want her any longer."

"She would never believe that."

"Perhaps not—but I would not let her sacrifice herself a second time to me—I can get on now by myself. To have Flora so happily married is the greatest relief to my mind. I have felt anxious about her. She is, unfortunately, so remarkably pretty, that she attracts attention wherever she appears, and that is, of course, a great temptation to a young lady to flirt."

"I am glad you are so happy about her. Lord Ramsay seems everything you can wish."

"He is, indeed," answered Mr. Crofton, more warmly than was usual with him.

"In every way he is just the husband I could have desired for Flora, and so steady and sensible that he will watch over her like an old father, as well as love her as a young husband ought to do."

"And now he has known her quite a long time."

"Yes—I am glad he has—and that their acquaintance dates as long back as it does. I believe I was rather unreasonable at one time—but let that pass; it was all for the best, and I am sincerely glad he did not propose to her when he first knew us. He has had time to know his own mind and all of us better—besides, she was but a child then."

"Flora is only eighteen now, I think?"

"No—but the last year has done wonders for her—one year's moving about at her age, is worth ten previous ones. She has not been idle whilst we have been travelling. I hope you will think her improved—and here she is herself, I see Mary and Flora coming down the lawn to meet us."

Yes, there were the two brides elect. Flora running to meet us, all dimpling with smiles in the perfection of her young beauty, and the sun shining down on her soft hair in ripples of gold. Lovely as I knew Flora to be, she had grown into fuller, more

exquisite beauty since I had last seen her. There was no shyness about her in receiving my congratulations. She soon passed by her father and me to meet Lord Ramsay and his cousin, and I heard her light laughter, when I turned and saw her, after embracing Juliet, hanging on the arm of her betrothed, whilst they all walked on to the house, talking gaily together. At all events, she seemed happy and well satisfied with the lot she had drawn in life, and apparently with him who was to share it with her.

Mary showed far more feeling than her beautiful niece—it amounted almost to agitation—when I kissed her and wispered a few fervent good wishes, and then Mr. Crofton slipped away and left us to ourselves. Mary, too, was altered for the better; she was looking very pretty, with a soft tender light over her whole countenance that I had never seen there before, but which was infinitely becoming.

"Then Keene has told you all?"

"Yes, you may fancy my surprise, and not a word all these long six weeks."

"Forgive me, dear Marian, for the very day after I had sent my last letter to you, I met Sir Edward Manwairing at the Roccas', he is a distant relation of hers. I cannot explain it all to you now—nor can I tell, when we again began to understand each other, after all those long years of separation. All I can tell you is, that somehow or other, we crept back into our old relations with each other—but we have only been engaged a very short time. I could not write to you whilst it was pending, and now I find I can't talk much more fluently on the subject. All I can tell you is, with one exception, I am very happy."

"And that exception is, I can imagine, leaving your brother."

"Yes; but he declared if he was the cause of any further separation, he should leave England directly after Flora was married, and travel about quite out of my reach," I laughed.

"Well, that was a very good way of making you tractable."

"Ah! yes; but besides that," said Mary, lowering her voice, whilst a shade of sadness came over her sweet face, "Sir Edward is an invalid—not actually so, for he goes about, does the same as other people, but he has a cough—and that makes every one who cares for him very anxious. He is ordered to pass this next winter in Egypt."

"And you intend taking care of him there?"

"I hope so," said Mary, simply.

And then I found their marriage was arranged to take place very shortly. Sir Edward was to meet them in London in a month's time, and they were to leave England directly after. Mary said she would not let him come into Yorkshire till his cough was better—she feared any change of climate for him—he was to stay where he was till the time of their marriage drew near.

"And so," said I, sorrowfully, "we shall soon loose you entirely; and I shall not even

have seen the person who is to take you away."

"Ah! I mean you to see him, Marian, if I can persuade you. We shall have a very quiet wedding; but I have set my heart on your being with me—my only bridesmaid. Will you promise me this?"

It may be supposed I was only too happy to give the required promise, as far as I dare answer for myself. Then there was Flora's affair to talk over—that had been settled long before Mary's engagement, or rather re-engagement. Flora had declared she intended to write to Juliet, and tell her of it. "And why she did not do so I cannot tell," said Mary. "I believe we both thought she had; but I must plead guilty to having been so engrossed with my own concerns, that I forgot everything else. Will you forgive me this time?"

It may be supposed I could easily excuse Mary's long silence, when so satisfactorily accounted for. Still, bright and pleasant as were my friend's prospects, there was a little leaven of sadness in my heart. It is gene-

rally so when we first contemplate any great change in life, either as regards our friends or ourselves.

Juliet and I were asked to stay and dine, Mr. Crofton promising that Claude should drive us home in the pony-carriage. Claude! I had almost forgotten him in the excitement of all I had heard, till he was mentioned; and then I began to wonder and to fidget about him. He had not appeared since we had been at the Hall—I did not think he was in the house, for Mr. Crofton had not alluded to him—everybody, in fact, was too full of their own affairs that day to have any spare thoughts for him. At least, I thought so till I heard Flora say to Juliet, as if in answer to some question,

"No, we have not seen Mr. Markham to-day—he dined with us last night, when he seemed in high health and spirits—indeed, he was quite the life of our party, for we were all very tired with our long journey; and I am afraid rather stupid, were not we, Allen?"

she asked, turning to Lord Ramsay with a bewitching little smile, which he answered by saying with an answering laugh,

"You must be the best judge of that; but I really was not aware I was more stupid than usual."

"Well, you were a little more silent—or sleepy perhaps, so you dreamt you were talking, which I have done sometimes myself."

"Perhaps you dreamt Claude Markham was talking, for I do not remember his being so particularly lively."

"No. Well, perhaps I did dream, for I know I was sleepy and tired to death."

"Then I am afraid Claude's talking kept you awake," put in Juliet; adding, "where has he been all to-day?"

"Oh! on some business for papa. Do you know Juliet, Lord Ramsay will hardly believe me when I tell him what a diligent man of business your brother has become. No, he looked quite incredulous, till papa confirmed what I advanced, and told him he

had left Mr. Markham to manage all his affairs. It is quite true, Allen, is it not?" said Flora, in her pretty little playful way.

I observed Lord Ramsay look a little grave for a moment, and then he said with perfect good humour,

"I am sure Claude's sisters will forgive my having felt and expressed a little surprise at finding him in the position he now occupies (I mean on account of his youth and inexperience); but I can truly say it will be a very pleasant one, if he proves himself equal to such an undertaking."

"If!" said Flora, "Why, he has done it already."

"I am glad to hear it," returned her lover, with the least degree of reserve in his tone. Whilst I thought to myself—

"I wish that excellent good man, Lord Ramsay, would not take it for granted he is a better judge of Claude than any one else," fancying his opinion of him not altogether as favourable as it might have been.

CHAPTER IX.

JULIET and I were often at the Hall during the three weeks or month the Croftons remained there. My sister's ascetic habits relaxing for a time, under the genial influence of her old friendship and affection for Flora. She could not resist her friend's entreaties to be with her as much as possible at this crisis of her life. So for the time being Juliet made over great part of her parochial duties to her old friend, Miss Jones, who declared herself but too happy to be so employed.

It was rather strange, I thought, that Flora should be so desirous to secure a *third* at that time, and I could not help fearing that Lord

Ramsay would often find his cousin Juliet *de trop*. Such did not seem to be the case, so I suppose she had discretion enough not to interrupt any particularly interesting tête-à-têtes and Flora did not scruple to say that she did not desire too many, as Lord Ramsay was so "awfully sensible and well informed," she was afraid he would discover her many deficiences if too frequently exposed to such an ordeal.

"Then what will you do, Flora," asked Juliet, "after you are married, when you will be always together and often alone?"

"Oh," replied her friend, laughing, "he will have taken me for better and worse then, so he must make the best of me!"

"As if you did not know that Lord Ramsay thinks, and will always think, everything you do and say perfection," said Juliet, in all sincerity; nevertheless, she kept her ground by her friend whenever particularly desired to do so. Lord Ramsay was also a good deal absent just then; he had heard of an estate to be purchased about twenty miles distant from Crofton Hall—a fine

old place and a good property altogether, and as he was looking out for some place in the country, this seemed very desirable in every respect. He liked Yorkshire, and Flora had no objection: in fact she knew very little of any other county, and as he had all the world before him where to chose he thought he could not do better than take advantage of the opportunity thus offered. So when Flora had been over to see it, and expressed herself charmed with the fine old house and spacious gardens and grounds, Lord Ramsay proceeded to make the purchase. Mr. Crofton thought it eligible, and was naturally pleased that his future son-in-law, whom he liked so well, should wish to fix himself in his own neighbourhood. I do not think he thought so much about having Flora settled near him, for he merely remarked on Miss Ramsay's congratulating him, that in all probability they might not meet the oftener on that account; nevertheless he was glad Lord Ramsay fancied the place. As the people to whom this property belonged were

very anxious to effect an immediate sale, and as Lord Ramsay had plenty of ready money for the purpose, there was no delay, and everything relative to the purchase was proceeded with at once. This, however, necessitated several consultations with lawyers and land-agents, &c., which gave Lord Ramsay a good deal of occupation at that time, besides the pleasant one of making love. Mr. Crofton would often, I know, have recommended him to depute Claude to examine into certain matters relative to the estate for him, but I could perceive, whilst listening to and answering with perfect courtesy all that was said, he treated any suggestion regarding my brother's competency for such a commission with mortifying silence. I soon saw, too, in other respects that Claude's situation, as respected Mr. Crofton's affairs, was not altogether an enviable one. The young man whom I have mentioned as son to his late agent, and over whom Claude had been set in absolute authority, had not been a pleasant person to deal with in his master's

absence. He was naturally jealous of my brother—though I do not wish it to be understood he was a bad man, or would have done Claude a wilful injury with Mr. Crofton; nevertheless, he would not have been sorry had his employer found *him* the better man of the two, and withdrawn his patronage from my brother to bestow it upon himself. In some things he had more practical knowledge than Claude, and could have been a great help to him, had he been inclined to work amicably with him, but his aim and object was to exalt himself and abase Claude—if he could.

Strange to say, this man, John Forest, found favour with Lord Ramsay, who always consulted him in preference to his cousin. Forest was a coarse, independent Yorkshireman, free of speech and without much respect of persons; tall, strongly built, and ungainly in appearance, and with an unbounded confidence in his own powers and perceptions. This man he upheld on every occasion, quietly declaring he understood his business, and was

a far fitter person to overlook an estate than any young, less practical agent could possibly be, even with the best intentions in the world.

I have no doubt Lord Ramsay tried to be kind to his cousin Claude, but he only succeeded in being condescending. He entirely misunderstood my brother; he evidently fancied him an idle, frivolous young man, whose good looks and pleasant manners had won the regard of his future father-in-law, and who, in compassion to his somewhat fallen fortunes and expectations, had, for the purpose of benefiting him, placed him in a situation he was by no means fitted to occupy.

Lord Ramsay, good man as he was himself, gave no credit for the warm, grateful feeling of devotion to Mr. Crofton's interests, that actuated his young cousin's every thought and deed. Nor did he guess how, by patient study and earnest zeal, Claude endeavoured to make up for his want of experimental knowledge, and to fit himself for the post he filled.

I do not think Lord Ramsay objected to his cousin's occupying the place of secretary alone to Mr. Crofton, seeing he wrote a clear, good hand, and was not given to making mistakes in copying out. Such a post, he believed, might be held by one of as limited a capacity as that with which he supposed Claude Markham to be endowed.

The ex-agent John Forest was quick enough to see all this, and, I have heard, improved any occasion that offered by reference to my brother's various amusements and engagements whilst Mr. Crofton was away, just carelessly remarking when he had the opportunity, "Ah, I looked after *that* when Master Markham was gone up the moors," etc. etc., or "Master Markham knew nothing of *that;* he was over at the dance I hear tell of at Thorpe."

There was no actual harm in these remarks, and Mr. Crofton would have been the first to wish Claude to go out and amuse himself. He knew well enough he could trust him not to neglect any work he ought to do.

I could see Lord Ramsay did not like his cousin—people are not obliged to like their first cousins even; and near relations though they were, there was a wide gulf between the man of rank and riches and high social position, and the poor young secretary, striving to earn an honest independence and make amends for past reckless expenditure.

I really believe the very perfection of Claude's personal appearance and the charm of his manner offended his severe taste. I have heard him say he delighted in beauty in a woman, but disliked it in a man—he thought it generally was coupled with weakness of character and mental inferiority. This was hardly liberal in Lord Ramsay, but I suppose he considered he had some precedent for what he so ruthlessly advanced.

Poor Claude! it was hard work for him just then. He must have seen something of Lord Ramsay's sentiments towards him; I

think he had an intuitive perception of them soon after their first acquaintance. Somehow or other the two young men did not get on together. Claude, though brave enough in the presence of danger, was a man of peace as regarded his friends and acquaintances; he was naturally kind and conciliatory in disposition: he had none of the fiery self-asserting spirit that loves to fix a quarrel on any one that does not recognise its fancied superiority and is touchily sensitive to all relating to its own merits; he would, in fact, rather shun than seek a dispute, and in that he resembled my father.

Hence it was that he came but little amongst us younger ones at that time. He would occasionally remain to dinner when particularly pressed by Mr. Crofton to do so, but he said his mother would be glad of his company when both Juliet and I were absent. Thus, though his mornings were as usual devoted to Mr. Crofton, he often went home at six o'clock.

Lord Ramsay had no wish or intention of being overbearing or unkind towards his young cousin, but he could not help looking down a little upon him from the heights of his own immeasurable superiority. He was very devoted to Flora, very lover-like in the way he watched her and waited on her, and suffered himself sometimes to be led by her pretty caprices. But even at those times there was a something which seemed to say, though he might submit *then*, he would rule *hereafter*. His was the master mind, and he felt it to be so.

Flora was by nature a trifler; she had much natural quickness, but she hated application of every kind. She learnt everything very superficially, and would never willingly devote herself to study of any kind. She had, however, a great appetite for light literature of all sorts and kinds—the lighter it was the better.

"It is the only sort of reading," she would say naïvely, "that suits my mental

digestion. Those sort of books," pointing to some volumes of interesting biography, brought down by Lord Ramsay for her edification, "are quite too heavy for me; they do not nourish my mind, only oppress it with a kind of night-marish recollection, that does me no good at all."

Lord Ramsay was, however, extremely desirous that Flora should eschew novels in general, and take more interest in a higher class of reading. It may be supposed he could only try to lead her taste that way, or in any other profitable direction. This might no doubt have been easy if Flora had loved her betrothed with an all-engrossing affection: she was so young, that he might have made her anything he desired. He seemed, however, to see no fault in her; he rather loved her the more for her little girlish freaks and fancies, and at all times carefully avoided anything like a lecture, or seeming to presume upon his own superior sense and information. Those were not the

days for that. Flora, on her part, seemed perfectly satisfied as far as her future position went, and she always spoke in the highest terms of her intended husband. It was plain she was not what is called "in love" with him, but their marriage might not be the less happy for that eventually. She certainly *liked* Lord Ramsay very much, and there was every chance that a warmer affection might follow.

The observations that I have recorded here struck me casually, as it were, from time to time during our frequent visits at the Hall. They did not make much impression on me then, though I remembered them well afterwards. My thoughts were far more engrossed with my friend Mary and her prospects. It was almost difficult to realise her position, for there was no lover to be seen; and Mary, quiet and thoughtful for others as ever, hardly appeared to me as if she were on the point of such an all-important change in life, and one that would take her

away from us for ever. I seemed to become far better acquainted with Mary Crofton in those few weeks than I had been in all the years of our previous intimacy; she let me see the hitherto sealed page of her past life, with its sorrowful disappointment, but all so gently borne and firmly concealed, that I had never suspected its existence.

I had always looked upon Mary as destined to remain for ever at the Hall, her beloved brother's cherished friend and companion; for although she was only two-and-thirty, the probability of her marrying had never entered my head. She would be a grievous loss to me—there was no glossing over that fact, and I felt it severely, yet I could not be selfish enough to wish things otherwise; besides, Mary did not disguise it from me that she was very happy in the future that lay before her. Still, I could not help pitying Mr. Crofton even more than I pitied myself, and I told Mary as much. She only smiled as she answered—

"I hope these changes will in time make fresh interests in life for Keene. I think, after Flora is married, he will be very little here, whatever he may intend now."

"And you are never likely to visit Yorkshire, you say, Mary, on account of Sir Edward's requiring a milder climate. Well, that is not a very hopeful prospect for your friends here."

"I hope, wherever my lot may be cast, that my friends, especially yourself, Marian, will come and see me. Depend upon it we shall meet just as happily in the south as in the north. If *I* cannot come here, there will be nothing to prevent your coming to see me, I hope."

Mary would not be induced to see anything in a doleful light. She spoke hopefully, too, of her future husband's health, when a winter in Egypt might have helped to restore it, with her own care and good nursing, she added; and then she hoped they might be able to live during the summer at his

own place in Sussex. She told me she had been there in past days, and that it was beautifully situated, and a fine old house.

There was no opposition made at home to my doing as Mary wished, and going with them all to London. It was a charming proposition altogether. I was asked to stay with them at the hotel, where they were to remain a week or ten days before the marriage took place. After that Mr. Crofton and Flora were to return home, bringing me back with them. Flora would gladly have included her friend Juliet in the party, but that she entirely declined it. She seemed to think such a step would endanger the steadfast principle by which she so carefully eschewed all worldly vanities and amusements. I hardly know what Juliet expected to befall her in London. She had never been there, and probably her ideas were taken from her mother's representations, which were rather highly coloured.

Thus Juliet declined the invitation entirely on her own responsibility; she had no wish

to enter into a fresh controversy with her mother, who she knew would wish her to go with the Croftons. She did not even consult her friend Luke Dillon, but she was quite sure she was acting in accordance with his wishes. We saw him at the Hall occasionally. Mr. Crofton was his patron, and he liked and esteemed the young clergyman whom he had benefited. Lord Ramsay also honoured Luke with his approval. I confess I often felt vexed and provoked that he should be preferred by him before my brother Claude. It was not on account of Lord Ramsay's position in life, but he was a man I respected so entirely, and in most instances liked, that I was grieved at his insensibility to the merits of his cousin Claude Markham.

Flora was to be married from her own home. The wedding was to take place at the Hall a month or two later than her Aunt Mary's. Lord Ramsay was not to return with Mr. Crofton and his daughter, and

when they parted in London it would be with the understanding that they were not to meet again until the day before the wedding. There were two or three reasons for this arrangement, one was Lord Ramsay had plenty of occupation for the time of allotted separation, and as Flora would then have no *chaperon*, it was considered to be more suitable to *les convenances* that things should be as they were settled. Lady Percival had promised to accompany her nephew when he came down to claim his bride, and be present at the marriage. Flora's bridesmaids were to be two of the Miss Eltons and ourselves. It was intended to be a quiet wedding, which was more I believe in accordance with the taste of the bridegroom and Mr. Crofton than of the bride-elect.

CHAPTER X.

IT was the middle of September when we arrived in London and made our temporary home in a quiet hotel in a very central situation. It may be supposed that town was empty enough at that time, and there were but few inducements to the gaiety and dissipation that Juliet apprehended.

We found, however, Lady Percival at home. She had waited expressly for the Croftons coming up, and was ready and desirous to be useful to them in any way that might be needed. It was very pleasant to find such a friend awaiting their arrival. She was most kind and helpful to Mary Crofton in the week that preceded her mar-

riage, and she took Flora under her especial care, as one about to be so nearly and dearly connected with her. The trousseaux of the two brides had been all ordered on their previous visit to London, and Mary was satisfied to consider hers quite complete. It was not so in Flora's case, there were a thousand little things to be added and ordered, and Lady Percival undertook to take Flora everywhere she wished to go, and to see that all should be in the most approved style as regarded her commissions. Lord Ramsay, too, was glad to avail himself of his aunt's all perfect taste in the selection of jewels and trinkets of various descriptions. Everything was thought of that could please and gratify the young girl's fancy; and Flora, it must be said, seemed more really contented and happy than I had seen her since the days of her engagement. Whether it was the calming influence of Lady Percival's presence and observation that contributed to it I know not, but it is certain that Flora was

in some respects a different creature to what she had been in her own home. She laid aside her restless manner and flighty style of talking, when Lord Ramsay was not present. She was much quieter, too, almost to pensiveness, when alone with Mary and myself, and never at any time did she indulge in her little displays of caprice as regarded her betrothed. Perhaps she began to realise more fully the great step in life she was about to take, and was learning to look upon her future husband with a more absorbing regard than she had hitherto felt.

The very evening of our arrival I was gratified in my wish of seeing Sir Edward Manwairing. He was waiting for us at the hotel, anxious to catch the first glimpse of Mary. The meeting between the lovers was very quiet and undemonstrative, but there was a look of deep happiness in the countenance of both, as they sat side by side, sometimes talking to each other, but for the most part joining in the conversation going

on around. Sir Edward was more gentleman-like in appearance than remarkably good-looking, and there was a shade of languor in his contenance and manner that might have been the result of ill-health or of past anxiety. It certainly did not proceed from any torpidity of mind or intellect. Both were bright and lively enough, as I soon discovered, after a few days' acquaintance had made us tolerably well known to each other. I soon saw he was devoted to Mary, and she no less to him. How he ever came to misunderstand her and give her up I could not imagine. His second love—if such it could be called—had resulted in a tolerably happy marriage. The greatest affection had been on the wife's side, although he had always treated her with the tenderest regard, and she died in early youth, believing herself to have been the happiest and most cherished wife in the whole world. It was a very blessed persuasion. Some three years had passed since Lady Manwairing's death, and

her husband had felt more affection for her after her death, perhaps, than he had during the whole course of their married life. No doubt there was some little inward consciousness of shortcomings on his own part during their brief wedded life. She left him one daughter, and a large fortune, which the child would inherit at her father's death.

This little girl was brought to the hotel the next morning, to see her future stepmother, and renew her acquaintance with the rest of the party. She had been with her father in Switzerland, and was consequently on intimate terms with all the Croftons. She was very pretty and engaging, and I was told extremely like her mother, after whom she was named Rosalie. Between her and Mary there appeared already to exist a strong mutual attraction and affection. Happy child! she was sure to be safe in her new mother's love!

I saw Sir Edward watch them both, with

such a calm look of loving contentment, that it was clear theirs would be a united household. To this happy home he gave me a kind and cordial invitation the day before the wedding. They intended, he said, to be absent that winter, but hoped the next spring or summer would see them really at home for good.

"Will it not, Mary *mia?* We shall have had enough of our Arab life. It will be refreshing to think of an English fireside then."

"We shall see," replied Mary. "You are to be quite strong before we can face an English winter."

"Ah! but will not you want to be at Manwairing, the place you remember so well, to feel yourself really at home there after all?"

"Wherever we are I shall feel at home, for my home will be with you," answered Mary, in a low voice. And then she turned to me and said, "And wherever that home is, my dear old friend, Marian Markham,

has promised to come and stay with me."

It was cheering to look forward to that prospect, when the next day came, and the wedding was over, and Mary had been duly given away by her brother, and Sir Edward Manwairing claimed his long lost love, as his own sweet wife till death should part them. There was a subdued tone about that wedding. Whatever Mr. Crofton's sentiments might be, he generally kept them to himself, but Flora certainly felt the parting with her aunt as much as it was possible for her to feel anything. There were very few guests, and no wedding breakfast. Lady Percival was present, and a friend of Sir Edward's. Flora and I were the only bridesmaids; and Lord Ramsay came—to take a lesson, Flora said. The newly-married pair started from the church door, for Mary was dressed so quietly, that putting a shawl over her white lace mantilla, with her pretty pale lilac dress, and white bonnet, no one would have recognised the bride by her attire.

It was chiefly on Sir Edward's account that all fuss and excitement were to be eschewed—so Mary said; but I could not help thinking she wished also in her thoughtful kindness to avoid giving her brother any needless worry.

Owing to these considerations, everything passed off very quietly—even to the parting with the bride. Mary herself was perfectly composed and cheerful; but I remarked she held Flora in a long embrace, and then, with something of a wistful, anxious look, placed her hand in Lord Ramsay's, as if she made over to him the precious charge she had held so long, and fulfilled so faithfully. We were all rather silent when we assembled afterwards at luncheon in our hotel. Mr. Crofton had asked the few friends, who had been present at the wedding, to join us, which was as well; it prevented our feeling the blank so much.

It had been arranged that we were all to return home the day after the wedding, so

I busied myself that afternoon (when I had taken off my pretty bridesmaid's dress, Mary's ever thoughtful gift) in making my little preparations for the intended move the next day. After that, I went down into the sitting-room, expecting to find it empty, knowing that Flora was going out with her father and Lord Ramsay, for a sitting for the picture that was then in progress; I was therefore rather surprised on entering the room at seeing Flora, whom I supposed otherwise engaged, still there. I fancied she was asleep, for she was half lying, half sitting on the sofa, her face buried in the cushions. At the sound of my approach she started up, and then I saw she had been, and was still crying bitterly. She wiped her eyes hastily, however, and shook back her disordered, but still lovely hair, and said,

"Oh! it's only you, Marian! I had forgotten you were in—I thought it was papa and Lord Ramsay come back."

Taking no heed of her tears, I replied—

"I thought you had gone with them to give Mr. A—— a sitting for your picture."

"Yes, I ought to have gone, but I really could not. I am so tired, I am quite knocked up. I daresay you think I am very foolish to sit here crying like a baby all by myself?"

"Indeed no, dear Flora; I think it is the most natural thing in the world that you should feel parting with your Aunt Mary—only you should remember, if she had not gone away just now, you would have been leaving her yourself in a few weeks' time," I returned, by way of consolation.

"No, it is not *that*," said Flora impatiently. "I should not cry for Aunt Mary's being happily married, and her going away for a little time; we shall meet again very soon, somewhere or other, I have no doubt; but—but it is all so very solemn."

"Solemn!—what?"

"Why, the marriage service—the being married and going away with a person chosen out

of all the world—away from everyone you have known all your life, and to live with them till death separates you!"

"Yes, it is solemn enough; but you must have thought of all this before, Flora; and I suppose great affection for the person you are about to marry makes all easy and natural enough."

"I daresay it does," returned Flora, sorrowfully. "I thought as much when I saw Sir Edward putting Aunt Mary into the carriage, and springing in so happily after her. I looked at both their faces as they drove away, and thought what a strange feeling it must be to be shut in there, and going away for ever with the person you love best—prefer to the whole wide living world!"

"Well, it is a feeling you will soon have the satisfaction of experiencing yourself, Flora."

"Shall I?" asked Flora, musing—"yes, of course—no doubt when I am married; but then things seem so different in one's own case."

"And have you been crying about all that ever since, Flora?" I asked, smiling at the petted child of good fortune, who seemed to me to be weeping from the very excess of indulgence.

"Yes, partly. I believe I never thought so much of all that marriage involves as I have done since we were in church this morning. There are some words of that ceremony I cannot get out of my mind—they keep ringing in my ears. I do wonder whether—I have been wondering ever since whether I really do love——"

I was not destined, however, to know (at least, at that time) the real subject of Flora's wonderment, for just then a waiter came into the room, and going up to Flora, announced in a deferential manner that a person was just arrived from "Storr and Mortimer's," and had a parcel to deliver to her. Lord Ramsay had desired him to come and give it himself to Miss Crofton.

"Show him in here," said Flora in reply, all

herself again, as she left the sofa, and came and sat on the opposite side of the room, with her back to the light, to hide her tear-stained eyes.

A gentlemanly person soon made his appearance bearing a blue bag, from which he proceeded to take various parcels addressed to Flora containing cases holding the jewels which Lord Ramsay had had reset for his bride. They were very numerous and beautiful, having been bestowed by his father on a similar occasion on his mother, then young and almost as lovely as Flora herself.

There were other trinkets, too, selected by Lord Ramsay, and ordered to be delivered at that time—no doubt in expectation of the Croftons leaving town the next day. Many of these Flora had never seen before, and as she looked at the sparkling treasures there presented to her, her tears were effectually dried up, and she soon became all lively animation, talking and laughing in her usual way.

The man who brought them being gone, we sat at the table opening and shutting the various cases, and admiring the extremely beautiful and brilliant ornaments contained in them. For myself, I was almost as delighted at the display as the fortunate possessor of such treasures, for the sight of such splendour was quite new to me, and I was quite girl enough to enjoy looking at "pretty things" in such perfection.

"After all," said Flora, as she tried the effect of some on her own fair person, "it is nice to have such loves of things sent one. Lord Ramsay is the most liberal person in the world, besides being everything else that is nice and good—indeed I do like and love him very much."

As no one had ever mooted the question, it seemed rather strange that Flora should have thought it needful to say she loved Lord Ramsay. I suppose it was a sort of sequel to the interrupted speech when the jeweller came in: altogether the diamonds,

etc., seemed to have had a very happy effect.

There was something very pretty and natural, almost childlike, in the way Flora showed Lord Ramsay how much she liked and appreciated his magnificent presents. He was quite delighted—it was evidently the one great joy of his heart to give her pleasure. He had come very full of a new plan, which he was very anxious Mr. Crofton should accede to. He brought a note from Lady Percival, who proposed the same and left it to her nephew to arrange as he might think it best to do.

It seemed the artist engaged on Flora's picture had been much disappointed in not seeing her that day for another sitting, and he had also declared that he should require a few more before the picture would be in a state of sufficient forwardness to go on with in her absence.

As Lord Ramsay designed this portrait as a present to Mr. Crofton, he was desirous

that the completion should not be long delayed, and therefore he begged Lady Percival to ask Flora and me to stay a week or ten days longer, and make her house our home. Lord Ramsay had possibly imagined that Mr. Crofton, having parted with his sister, might not consider me sufficient chaperon for his daughter, or that, at all events, I might not wish to extend my visit at the hotel after my friend's departure. It was altogether a kind and thoughtful proposition. The note was addressed to Flora, and she dimpled and smiled as she read it, and asked what I thought of it—if I would accept Lady Percival's invitation.

"Papa remains here, you know. He says he has no objection if we like to go to Lady Percival's, but if you have the least wish to return home, as we settled before we came, he should make a point of our all going back as intended to-morrow."

All this had been discussed, I found, between the rest of the party, and even so

far settled before Flora read her note.

"Besides," she said, "I do rather want to stay, for Allan had several things he wants me to see about the house in Grosvenor Square, which is to be newly furnished while we are away this winter, so as to be all ready for us next spring. So I hope, Marian, you will like to stay. I will manage Mrs. Markham and Miss Ramsay if you will consent."

I told Flora truly I did not fear any opposition from them, and was quite ready to stay, and should really enjoy a visit at Lady Percival's extremely.

"Oh, yes, I forgot," said Flora archly, "you ought to like going there, for you are sure to see a great deal more of your friend Mr. Digby. And who can tell what may come of that?"

"I think *I* can," I returned, with as much composure as I felt, adding, "nevertheless I shall have great pleasure, as usual, in meeting Mr. Percival Digby."

And now I must say why and wherefore, and who this Mr. Digby was. He was a nephew of Lady Percival's, or rather of her late husband's, one of his sisters having married Sir John Digby; Percival Digby, being a third son, was provided for by an appointment in the East Indian Civil Service; owing to his family's interest this happened to be a lucrative appointment, and he was, on his part, considered to have filled it well. He had been in India seven years, and was then in England for the first time since he had left it. He was not invalided exactly, but was rather glad of the excuse of some trifling attack of fever, to return home and see his family and friends.

He was a great favourite with Lady Percival: she had liked him as a youth, and had helped him to procure the very desirable situation he held in India; and now she still felt the same partiality for the man she had done for the boy. His father being dead and the old home broken up for him (his

eldest brother was not married, and seldom went there), he made his home chiefly with Lady Percival when in London, and he seemed to prefer it even in September to any other place.

Thus it happened, as I went a good deal to Lady Percival's with Flora, that I constantly met this same Mr. Digby. He was good-looking, particularly pleasant, and full of information of all sorts and kinds, which he had a happy knack of imparting to his less learned acquaintance. He was very kind and good-natured in that way to me. And this notice to one who was such a waif and stray on society in London, and belonging to no one there, was doubly welcome.

There was, too, a bond of union between us, no doubt of far greater moment in my eyes than in his—he knew my eldest brother. As soon as he heard my name he asked the question which led to the discovery that I was the sister of his old Indian friend, Piers

Markham. This revelation took place in the earliest days of our acquaintance, dating even from the evening of our first introduction. The knowledge of this fact would alone have sufficed to invest Mr. Digby with considerable interest in my mind, as being a sort of connecting link between me and that still fondly-remembered brother, who had been so long absent that his very name and existence seemed nevertheless almost mythical.

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN I say that Percival Digby made his home with his aunt, Lady Percival, I do not mean that he actually lived in her house, or even was always to be found there. He had his bachelor apartments elsewhere, but there was seldom a day passed without his dropping in, and when not otherwise engaged he always dined in Curzon Street. He came in sometimes in the morning to write his letters, and often to read the papers, which he said was much pleasanter than in his solitary rooms. He was a domestic, sociable person; he liked to discuss what he read with some one who could enter into and reciprocate his ideas, and no one suited him for that purpose

better than quick, clever Lady Percival. It was pleasant to listen to the two, and it often happened that I had that intellectual treat after Flora and I went to stay in Curzon Street. There was no occasion for me to speak: I was only too well satisfied to listen, but they were always very good-natured in trying to include me in all their discussions.

It was a happy fortnight we spent there. I have often thought of it since. Lady Percival became very fond of Flora, though she had but little of her time or conversation. It was but natural that Lord Ramsay should make the most of the time that had been granted for his especial benefit. There was, too, so much to be done. Flora sat nearly every day for this picture. She held consultations about re-furnishing the house in Grosvenor Square, and that led to many an excursion to far-off places, when her father generally accompanied the two lovers. Sometimes Lady Percival and I were of the exploring

parties, and now and then Mr. Digby joined us. He and Lord Ramsay had been well acquainted in past days, but seven years of stirring life to each, and so far apart, had made a blank in their former intimacy which was not so easily filled up. They were, however, on excellent terms, and Lord Ramsay, when not engrossed with Flora, was well pleased to renew his early friendship with Percival Digby.

I suppose it must have been through Lord Ramsay that Flora was made acquainted with the fact that Mr. Digby was looking out for a wife to take back with him to India. She told me this with a look of great significance, and then asked me how I should like to go to India. That was a question I had often debated in my mind, in reference to my brother there, and at one time, if he had said "Come," I think I should have gone at once. But the word was never said, and as he had married since, all desire had faded away; besides, I loved the old home, and all around

it, and it would have been a great pang to have quitted it, so I answered I had no wish whatever to go to India. Thereupon Flora asked me another question.

"But would not you like to go there with anyone you liked very much?"

"Perhaps I might, Flora; but no one I like very much is likely to go, and my brother there would not care to have me now he has got a wife."

"Oh! Marian, you know well enough what I mean. Mr. Digby is sure to *ask* you to go back with him as his wife, so you had better consider the answer you mean to give him."

"It will be time enough, Flora, when he does ask me; and as I have no wish nor expectation that he will, there is no necessity to prepare for such an occasion."

"Well, I suppose it is all right for you to say so; and I know you are a little particular, Marian. Only I tell you, as a friend, what Ramsay told me, and that is,

Mr. Digby says you are the most interesting girl, or woman, he has seen in England; and he is quite determined never to marry in India; and as he wishes to have a wife, he hopes to find one to take out with him. Now, if you put all these things together, I think you will come to the same conclusion that I have done—viz., Mr. Digby will ask the interesting Miss Markham to be kind enough to marry him, and go back with him to India."

I laughed, but said no more on the subject to Flora; but I confess her words had raised a question in my own mind which had never entered there before, for, good friends as I had been with my brother's friend, I had never thought of him in the light of a probable lover before. Should Flora's words come true, and should Mr. Digby think and do as she foretold, what ought *I* to say and do on the occasion? My answer was to the effect that my conduct should, meanwhile, be so merely friendly,

and no more, that the question should never be asked. And then I felt heartily ashamed of my pre-settling the matter, or fancying that a man like Percival Digby was at all likely seriously to fancy a woman who had so little to recommend her as myself. I felt sure too he would not find it difficult to persuade some very charming girl to go back to India with him as his wife.

As for Flora's fancies, they all ran upon love and matrimony at that time, so I was sure it was with a kind intention she took it into her head that I was about to become a fitting subject for both. I wondered whether her father had ever made any such observations as she had attributed to Lord Ramsay, in regard to Mr. Digby's attentions, or rather intentions in regard to myself. I knew if he had, he was not likely to impart them to Flora, for the father and daughter were not on those easy terms together. He seemed especially at that time most anxious about everything that concerned her

future prospects, and deeply interested in all that concerned both her and her future husband; but I never heard Flora—playful as she often was with others—I never heard her joke, or talk nonsense with her father.

Mr. Crofton had not been very much at Lady Percival's, for he had found a few of his own friends, empty as London naturally was at that time, and those men of some literary note; and he had been a great deal engaged with them since Lady Manwairing left us. He had been busy, too, whenever he could find time, with something or other connected with a forthcoming pamphlet of his own. I fancy he had sent down several rough draughts on the subject for Claude to transcribe fairly. I could not therefore expect that my friend—my *best* friend I ever termed him to myself—would have any spare time to speculate on me or my possible lover, Mr. Digby.

All of a sudden, however, one day, just before it was settled we were to leave Lon-

don, Mr. Crofton seemed to wake up to a dim suspicion of what might be going on between us. He had been dining at Lady Percival's—there were two or three guests besides ourselves, for it was then October, and some of Lady Percival's resident friends were beginning to return to their London homes. Lord Ramsay was of course there; and Mr. Percival Digby. There was music in the evening; and as I was far too shy to be a performer, I was one of the listeners: and Mr. Digby came and sat down by me. He talked that evening more earnestly, almost seriously to me, under the cover of some long instrumental pieces, than he had ever done before: and Flora's words darting into my recollection, made me feel troubled and confused as I listened and answered as best I might. He did not, however, propose to me, though he talked much of his Indian home, and loneliness there, and the comfort and happiness of such a domestic life as he had been leading the last few weeks in that

very house; and then he expatiated on the charm he found in the gentle companionship of an intelligent and perfectly natural and unspoilt woman.

I could not help feeling by his manner he was intending me to apply his remarks for my own benefit. However, when he went on to talk of the gift of beauty completing the charm that had so much fascination for him in the society he had lately enjoyed, I began to breathe a little more freely, and feel reassured, thinking he must allude to Flora, and that it was a pretty compliment, intended through me, to be conveyed to his friend's intended wife.

So, being much relieved, I looked up with a murmur of assent in the direction where I knew Flora to be found, but in so doing I suddenly confronted a fixed concentrated gaze that made me almost start. It was Mr. Crofton looking so intently at me—and I suppose my companion; and withal, as I fancied, so sternly, that I felt sure I was

doing something he disapproved of. Under the strange power and influence of that look I rose up, and said something about wishing to look at the words of some song, and then leaving my companion I made my way alone to the piano and remained there, as near as I could within the friendly shelter of the amateur performers. I was glad I had done so, for when I looked next at Mr. Crofton the sternness of his brow had relaxed, and when our eyes met, he gave me a half nod, and the shadow of a smile flitted across his grave steadfast face. He did not speak to me till just before he went away, and then he said,

"I forgot to mention before, I have obtained leave for you and Flora to look at the pictures at D—— House; I am sure it will be a treat to you; they are the finest private collection in England. Tell Flora I will call for you both early to-morrow."

He spoke kindly and pleasantly, and I felt greatly relieved. We had but two more

days remaining of our visit to Lady Percival—only one more morning besides that destined to the pictures. I felt almost glad now we were going home; I did not want to have any more long embarrassing conversation with Mr. Digby, whether they related to Flora's beauty, or my own companionability. I plainly saw by Mr. Crofton's countenance that there was something in them he did not approve. He came very early the next morning, before anyone else had thought of calling, so we went with him at once, leaving word for Lord Ramsay to follow.

He soon overtook us, and then we walked off in two pairs, and I enjoyed the full benefit of Mr. Crofton's conversation. With his perfect taste and knowledge of painting, it was to me a very interesting exhibition, having hardly ever seen anything of the kind before; and then he took such pains to point out everything best worth seeing to me. We had become so engrossed in

our picture subject, that I almost started when Mr. Crofton turned to another—and that other was Mr. Digby. He spoke as he always did to me, openly and to the point, at once he said,

"I thought you seemed on very intimate terms with Mr. Percival Digby last night, I suppose you have seen a great deal of him in Curzon Street?"

"Oh, yes—he is constantly at his aunt's—she is very fond of him."

"And you, Marian—do you like him?"

"Oh, yes, he has been very kind and good natured to me; and, besides, he knows my brother Piers in India," I answered as indifferently as I could. Mr. Crofton scanned my face for a moment, and then, as I looked anxiously up at him, his relaxed into one of his sweet grave smiles, and he said,

"Knows your brother! so that is the charm, is it?"

"Yes, it made me feel acquainted at once with Mr. Digby."

"And yet you are generally rather shy of new acquaintances."

"I suppose I am; but he is a very easy person to get on with, and we have met so often at Lady Percival's, that it would be impossible to feel shy with him."

Again Mr. Crofton looked in my countenance as he remarked rather stiffly,

"You certainly seemed to find great satisfaction in his conversation, whatever the subject may have been."

I answered with perfect sincerity.

"The last subject he talked off was beauty; so his remarks were intended to apply to Flora."

"That's nonsense, Marian."

"Why?" I asked, rather in alarm.

"Come," said he, getting up from the form where we had been resting ourselves in the long gallery, "we need not talk any more about this Mr. Digby—unless it is a subject of real interest to you, and then you can say anything you like."

"Indeed no: I have no other interest than that I told you of."

He looked again at me, and then said gently—

"Well, then, if that is the case, is it not a pity to give a contrary impression to the world in general—it may be to the man himself?"

"Indeed I could not help it. I had no wish to sit out there with Mr. Digby the whole evening, pleasant and nice as I really think him; but—but," I added, hesitating, half afraid to speak out—"but I saw you looking as if I was doing wrong, so I came away."

Mr. Crofton smiled again, and as we were walking through the suite of rooms to find Flora and her lover, he pressed my arm to his side, and then said,

"It is very good of you, Marian, to think so much of what I look. I did wish you to come away, I confess, for Flora was making some foolish remarks to Ramsay, and that made me take such particular notice of you

and Mr. Digby—you will forgive me?"

It was a strange idea to me, that of Mr. Crofton asking forgiveness of me—it was so strange, that it required no answer. I could only laugh at it, and inwardly thank him for taking the trouble of thinking about me at all —he who had always been my best and truest friend in life.

We walked on in silence then till we came upon Flora and Lord Ramsay, both waiting our return, Flora declaring (as she often did) she was "tired to death," and Lord Ramsay anxious to take her back to Lady Percival's for rest and refreshment, after which there was to be a last and final sitting for the portrait.

It was late when we got to Curzon Street, and we found Lady Percival waiting luncheon for us, and Mr. and Mrs. Charles Ramsay in waiting also. They were both so very desirous of being introduced to Miss Crofton, that they had waited till she and Ramsay returned, Lady Percival having asked them to stay and

lunch there. This was one of Lady Percival's little acts of self-denial and kindness, for there were few people she liked so little as the Charles Ramsays: but she felt it was very natural they should wish to see Flora, as well as their nephew, so, with the best grace possible, she asked them to remain with her till they came back.

So there we found them, both in a state of great expectation, the gentleman finding solace and comfort from the head of his cane, and Mrs. Charles confidentially confiding to her hostess the various causes of surprise she had met with since they had left London. After her guests had consented to remain, she took up her netting, and listened, or seemed to do so, with patient resignation. It was thus we found them on our return.

"I was wondering so," said Mrs. Charles, "whether you would come back at all. When I heard where you were, I was quite surprised, for my husband wanted to get an order for a friend to see those pictures, and somehow or

other he never got it. I know it is so difficult, but of course Lord Ramsay would find it easy enough. I only wonder, when you did get there, you did not stay all day. Were not you charmed?"

"Yes; I have seen the collection before, but in this instance we are all indebted to Mr. Crofton for the pleasure we have enjoyed," replied Lord Ramsay, introducing his friends.

When Flora returned to the drawing-room, having taken off her bonnet, she evidently became an object of fresh surprise to Mr. and Mrs. Charles Ramsay. Mrs. Charles testified it in loud congratulatory aside remarks of commendation to Lord Ramsay, whose good-natured toleration was sorely tried, but answered courteously, as was his wont, and then turned the conversation to something more general. His uncle, meanwhile, said but little; but whilst enjoying his accustomed solace, he fixed his eyes stolidly on Flora's beautiful face as the most agreeable object in the room.

It was a relief to everybody when luncheon was announced, and then, as I passed close by Mr. Charles Ramsay on leaving the room, he removed his stick from its peculiar position, and made a sort of gesture of recognition. On my returning it, he remarked, in a deep voice, with a languid glance of his heavy eyes in Flora's direction, "Stunningly handsome!" and then subsided into a place at the table, where he was soon deeply engaged to his utmost contentment.

Mrs. Charles Ramsay made amends for her husband's silence; she talked without intermission, and explained to everyone that would listen how it was they came to return so early to London that year, and how surprised we must all be to see her and her husband at that time: but she was highly gratified that it *had* chanced so to happen, as it gave them the pleasure of seeing their nephew, and being introduced to his beautiful *fiancée*.

"Oh!" said the lady, turning to me, who sat near, "I was *so* surprised when I heard

the news of Ramsay's going to be married! Somehow I had fancied" (dropping her voice) "that neither he nor Lady Percival would ever find anyone good enough for him; but really, when one sees such beauty as that, I cease to be astonished."

CHAPTER XII.

WE saw nothing of Mr. Digby that day till the evening when he came to dinner. I knew he was engaged with an old friend who had come to London for the purpose of seeing him. He said he wished it had been a few days later, as he should have had more time to sacrifice to friendship. This friend only remained two days, and those were the last of our stay in London, which he seemed to regret very much. However, Mr. Digby pleaded his engagement to meet us at dinner that day, and hoped his friend would be satisfied with the morning hours. The following day he had promised to dine with him, and give us the morning.

I was not sorry when I heard the Charles Ramsays were invited to dinner on the same day as Mr. Digby. Lady Percival had been moved to compassion on Mrs. Ramsay's representations of the forlorn state of her household when they returned home so unexpectedly, so when they took their leave after luncheon she asked them to come and dine also.

I was glad, because, had the party remained the original six in number, I found we should have made three pairs, as Lady Percival would most likely have appropriated Mr. Crofton, leaving the pair of lovers, whilst I should have fallen to the share of Mr. Digby. It was not that I in any way disliked the company or conversation of that gentleman, but I had the fear of my old friend before my eyes, and dreaded lest I might again offend his fastidious taste by a too exclusive tête-à-tête.

There was no farther fear of such a casualty befalling me, after the enlargement of

our dinner-party. I seated myself by Mrs. Charles Ramsay in the evening, and devoted myself to her entertainment. The task was easy enough, seeing that she only required me to listen, and put in a leading question, or comment, as the case might require. She was very ready to talk to me, as she secured another listener in so doing, for Percival Digby hovered about, and after two or three fruitless attempts to break up our tête-à-tête by asking me to look at some books or engravings on a distant table, which I declined doing, he gave himself up to his fate, and drew in his chair, and joined in the talk going on between Mrs. Ramsay and me. Her husband had taken up his position within sight, but at a discreet distance from his nephew and Flora, and appropriating a jewel-handled paper-knife in the place of his cane, fixed his dull eyes on Flora's beautiful face, and seemed well amused and contented. Now and then he made some slight observation intended for

Lady Percival's benefit, as she happened to sit near talking to Mr. Crofton.

I could not hear what these remarks might be, as the whole width of the room divided us, but I could not help often glancing in that direction, and wondering what was the nature of the subject that seemed so amusing to the two who were principally engaged in it.

As I encountered no stern looks, I had the comfort of supposing my conduct and conversation appeared blameless in my old friend's sight. If the intense inanity of our discourse was a proof of merit, no one could find fault with that carrying on for some time between Mrs. Ramsay and me. She seemed delighted when Mr. Digby at last seated himself, saying—

"Shall I be *de trop*, Mrs. Ramsay? You and Miss Markham look so comfortably engrossed that I am half afraid of interrupting you. If you are talking secrets I will go away!"

"Oh! not for the world, Mr. Digby. Pray come and amuse us a little. I was only telling Miss Markham how surprised both Charles and I were to get a letter the very day we were leaving Sir Charles Norton's to go to Admiral Douglas's to say Mrs. Douglas was so extremely ill they had to put off their party. Now, I do say it was a most extraordinary thing that nobody knew Mrs. Douglas was ill till just the very morning we were going to them."

"Possibly the attack of illness, whatever might have been its nature, was very sudden," suggested Mr. Digby, who had taken up my scissors and was snipping ends off my wools with them.

"Sudden! it must indeed have been sudden for her not to have felt anything of it a day or two sooner; or she might have waited at least a little later, till we had got there."

"At all events it wa svery inconsiderate of Mrs.Douglas or her malady," amended Mr.Digby.

"Yes, that's just what I said to Charles, it *was* highly inconsiderate, not to say inhospitable! And I daresay they could have helped it too, one way or another; so now see the consequences it entails! We go home on the spur of the moment, not knowing what else to do; and there we find everything in confusion—house-cleaning, carpets up, and the cook gone out holiday-making!"

"That was very inconsiderate of her," reiterated Mr. Digby.

"Of course it was! shameful—but you see we were not expected for a full fortnight; for I had intended remaining at the Admiral's for that time; and then to my astonishment we had to go home instead."

"You must have astonished your household in their turn," observed Mr. Digby.

"I think we did; but it did not seem a pleasant surprise, by any means."

"We ought not to regret it, as possibly had your house been in order, we should not have had the pleasure of meeting you here to-day,"

said Mr. Digby, who had been duly informed as to the state of the case.

"Well, perhaps not," replied the lady, hesitating a little, "for if we had not come home so unexpectedly, we should not have heard of Mr. and Miss Crofton being here, or could have met them to-day; but indeed it has been a great gratification to me to have made their acquaintance, and" (after a little pause) "to have renewed that with Miss Markham."

"Yes, I can easily imagine *that* must quite reconcile you to all the *disagrèmens* you have encountered."

Mrs. Ramsay looked up with a little sharp questioning glance, as if she felt her home troubles were too weighty to be so easily disposed of; however, she answered with dignity,

"I never consider myself, when I am able to do what I think right to others; now as Lord Ramsay is the head of my husband's family, although his nephew, we are glad to be able to show this attention to his intended wife and her family, and therefore, though it

cannot *remove* the inconveniences from which I am suffering, it makes them perhaps easier to endure."

Mr. Digby stole a mischievous glance at me, and said, that was the true spirit to oppose to all troubles, domestic ones especially."

"Ah, Mr. Digby," said she, descending to her every-day tone, "it is very easy for you single men to talk about domestic troubles, when you know nothing of them but the name."

"How can you tell that, Mrs. Ramsay? And if we have not one trouble, perhaps we have another."

"Ah, I daresay you have; there is plenty of trouble of one kind or another in the world! And I know single men have theirs also, for poor Charles said so; before we married he had a sister living with him."

"I am not so fortunate," returned Mr. Digby.

"No, I know that, and my opinion is you would find a wife much pleasanter."

"That would depend upon the sort," returned the gentleman.

"Well, if I were you, and going back to India, I would try and find one of some sort to take back with me."

"You give very good advice, Mrs. Ramsay, and I will endeavour to follow it. I hope, Miss Markham, I have not been doing mischief," pointing to the little heap of many coloured wool he had been diligently cutting up; "but when I am listening intently, and am much interested in a conversation, I have a bad habit of employing my fingers, often to the detriment of my nearest neighbour's goods. Here, Miss Markham, I return your scissors, but fear I cannot give you back your wool; perhaps you will lend me a pencil instead, I think I can employ it better."

I gave him a little silver pencil-case that had long lain in my work-box; it was one of my brother Piers' boyish gifts, and I told Mr. Digby so. He looked at it with interest, saying,

"Good old Markham! I declare I could just fancy it; and his giving it to his little sister; how much I shall have to tell him!"

"I wish you would tell him to come home to his sister," I replied.

"But you know he has a wife now, and sisters take a very secondary place."

"Do they?" said I mournfully.

"Yes, they do; so sisters should—" and then he stopped abruptly, and Mrs. Ramsay took up his words and said,

"So sisters should marry themselves."

Mr. Digby only smiled, and said,

"More good advice, Mrs. Ramsay;" then he turned to me and asked—"Will you give me some paper, as well as a pencil; I fear I cannot make much use of one without the other."

"You will find plenty on that table," said I pointing to the writing-table.

"Just come then, please, if you do not mind the trouble, and kindly show me what I may take."

"You cannot go wrong," said I, still retaining my seat, and turning to talk to Mrs. Ramsay to avoid further importunity. Whilst Mr. Digby was standing at the writing-table (which

was by the way far more familiar to him than to myself), and as it seemed, to me in a casual glance, busily employed in writing something down, the butler came in and announced that Mrs. Ramsay's carriage was at the door. Now, as this happened to be a hired brougham, it did not suit either Mr. or Mrs. Charles Ramsay to keep the vehicle waiting. Mr. Ramsay heard the announcement as quickly as his wife, and rose up from his seat of abstraction and came up to her saying, "Don't keep it waiting, my dear." A needless caution, for Mrs. Ramsay was already saying goodnight, and then the pair took their departure. As soon as they were gone we all clustered together, and after a little general chat, and some appointments made for the following day, all prepared to take their leave. Flora said she was "tired to death," so Lord Ramsay took the hint and was the first to go away.

Mr. Digby said goodnight also, and then fidgeted about a little, asking some trifling

questions, which drew the rest of the party a little aside to look at something; he then hastily came up to me, and as he shook hands, pressed a piece of paper into mine, just saying, "please read it," and before I could answer he was gone. Mr. Crofton went too, and then Lady Percival and Flora followed.

I was so impatient to see what the paper contained, and fearing that Flora might follow me into my room, I stayed back in the empty apartment to read what was written. It was very short—and only said,

"Forgive my troubling you with this, but I cannot find an opportunity to speak to you alone. Do pray let me see you to-morrow. I will call at twelve, and beg you to see me *alone*. I will go into the dining-room. I must know my fate before you leave town.

"Yours ever,

"PERCIVAL DIGBY."

I stood in a state of extreme confusion, look-

ing at this note so utterly unexpected, and turning it over by the light of one of the lamps on the chimney-piece when I heard a movement near the door, and looking in the glass, saw Mr. Crofton walking up the room. As I turned in surprise and some consternation he said quietly,

"I left a book Lady Percival lent me this evening—I think I shall find it on that table."

He did not, however, approach the table he spoke of, but came up to me and stood by my side. I felt very guilty with Mr. Digby's note in my hand, which I did not attempt to hide from my old friend, and kept silence waiting for him to speak.

His first words, "I am afraid I have disturbed you, Marian! You must wish me gone." He made, however, no move to go, and I replied,

"Oh, no, indeed, I was just looking at this."

I spoke in some confusion, not knowing what to say.

"Yes," replied Mr. Crofton very quietly; "I

saw him give it to you. I did not know you kept up a correspondence."

"A correspondence! no indeed; this is the very first note, and I am so surprised."

"Are you! Well, Marian, I suppose we are to lose you."

"Why?"

"Why, has not Mr. Digby asked you to be his wife, and if so, will not you go back with him to India?"

"Then if he asks me you think I ought to go?" I answered with a swelling heart.

"It is not what I think on the matter; it is for *you* to think and answer."

I was silent, and feeling so sad, the tears came almost without my knowing I was crying,

"Good Heavens! child—Marian; don't cry, except indeed you are shedding tears of joy?" He spoke more vehemently than I had ever heard him do before, and there was a strange tone in his voice, half anger, half tenderness.

"No, you are angry with me!"

"And does that make you unhappy, my poor child?"

"What am I to say to Mr. Digby?" I asked by way of answer.

"Nay, how can I tell. I do not even know the terms you are on."

"He asks me to see him at twelve to-morrow, to—to decide his fate—before I leave town."

"Well—Marian?"

"What can I say," I asked, looking tearfully at my best friend. He had taken my hand, but now dropped it quickly and answered,

"If you have a doubt, perhaps you had better give him the benefit of it, and go with him, as he asks."

"Never!" I answered, with something like displeasure in my heart at the counsel so readily given; and then added, as calmly as I could, "You may advise me to go, because you think it would be a good thing for a dependant woman like myself to have a home; but I could not do so unless—unless I loved the person that offered it to me."

"Then why, Marian, are you in doubt as to the answer you mean to give Mr. Digby when he calls on you to-morrow?"

"I spoke stupidly—I only meant *how* was I to say it to him? Oh! how I wish he would not come—that he had never written this note to me!"

"And yet, Marian, it is a good match for you, or any other girl; and in your case you would find your nearest relation in India, if you went there as Mr. Digby's wife, instead of leaving every one you love behind you."

"Then you think it wrong of me to refuse so good and desirable a match?"

"No, I do *not*. If you do not love Mr. Digby, it is wise and right and womanly to refuse him."

"Oh! thank you!" said I, much relieved, feeling as if I were placed on *terra firma* again, after being suspended over a precipice, my "best friend" holding me there.

"Marian," said Mr. Crofton, taking both my

hands in his, "do you really mean that you would have married this man had I wished—advised you to do so?"

I kept silence for a moment, communing with my own heart, for I knew his power over my will was so strong, it would have been hard to resist; and yet—no, never, never—it could not have been! I felt sure I could not have vowed to love Mr. Digby, even if my best, yes, my dearest friend, had so desired me. And then I whispered,

"No, I must have disobeyed your wishes."

Then he dropt my hands, and took a turn through the long silent room; whilst I listened to the loud ticking of the clock close by, and watched his movements in the glass. At length Mr. Crofton returned, and came up to me, and again took both my hands in his, and then in a deep, tender voice, he asked,

"But, Marian, my darling, will you do now as I ask you? Will you marry *me*, and be my own dearly-loved wife?"

Long years have passed since those words were spoken, but I have never forgotten the feelings with which I heard them. For a moment or more, I was quite incapable of speaking—the whole thing was so unexpected, the rush of happiness so bewildering, that I felt faint and giddy, and should have fallen, had it not been for the strong arm that held me up.

"Is it true?—can it be real?—do you mean it?" were the words that came with difficulty at last.

"Do I mean it? Nay, Marian dearest, what does your own heart say?"

"Oh! it is all so strange; and yet," I whispered, "so happy!"

"That is enough for me. And is it possible that you, Marian, can care so much for me?"

"Oh! yes—yes, indeed, if I may——"

There were a few more reassuring words after that confession, and then Mr. Crofton looked at the clock, and said more in his usual tone and manner,

"It is getting late. I must find my book and be gone; and it is quite time you were at rest; and I hear some one on the stairs, coming up, I daresay, to put out the lights. We shall meet to-morrow and talk more of this matter. You will say nothing to Flora, or any one, meanwhile."

No need to have given me that caution. I felt as jealous of my newly-found treasure of affection, and as anxious to keep it from all curious eyes as a miser of his golden hoard. I should have thought it diminished if any one besides our two selves had been made acquainted with its existence. And so I went to rest that night with a heart full of joy and gratitude. I often started in my sleep with my dream of waking happiness, rousing me to full consciousness, and repeating all that had passed over and over again, to assure myself it was real—that it had actually occurred, and was not a phantom of my brain, arising from the visions of the night.

Oh, the blissful waking the next morning! I could hardly realize my own identity in such a new and strange position—the betrothed of Mr. Crofton! he, who had always been enshrined in my heart and imagination as standing so aloof in all the superiority of his intellectual and individual attainments and personal endowments, that the possibility of his caring for me in that way, had never presented itself to my mind. Whilst I—what could he have seen in me in his goodness and greatness to wish to make me his wife! Perhaps—and the thought swept across my mind with the force of perfect conviction—it might have been the extreme and entire contrast between me and my sorroundings, to his first wife and all appertaining to her. Be that as it might, nothing could diminish my feeling of intense happiness and thankfulness. I can truly say, that at that time I never thought of Mr. Crofton's worldly advantages, and how great a change it would

make in my social position. I, who was indebted to my step-mother for a home, and was in every way dependant on my absent brother's bounty for a maintenance. No, there was quite enough superiority in Mr. Crofton without bringing in the recollection of all his worldly possessions to overwhelm me with a sense of nothingness. But as his love had bridged over the great gulf between us, there was no need for me to make myself giddy and bewildered in the contemplation of the same.

It was enough, he had freely chosen me, and henceforth the whole study of my future life should be to make myself more worthy of his choice.

When I left my room that morning I felt the only drawback to my perfect felicity that same day was the impending interview with Mr. Digby; and yet, I felt so innocent of having drawn it upon myself, and so strong in my store of untold happiness within, that I could not feel any

sentiment stronger than regret for any disappointment he might suffer on the occasion, and a very strong desire to have it all over.

Twelve o'clock came soon enough, and he was very punctual. It was kind of Lady Percival, who told me Mr. Digby was waiting below anxious to see me, and adding a few pleasant words to show she knew the errand on which he was come, and kindly wished him every success. I would not leave her in any doubt as to the result of our interview, and as she saw at once the state of the case, with the usual consideration for the feelings of others, she only said,

"I truly and sincerely regret it is so, and that you can give Percy no hope. I am very fond of him, and should have been delighted had you been so also—but what can't be, can't be; so, my dear, the sooner you go and put him out of his misery, the better."

It was quickly over that interview which I

had dreaded so much. Percival Digby was a thorough gentleman: he saw at once that it was only friendship I could give him. Freely and cordially did I like him, but timid as I was on most occasions, I managed to let him know how decided my feelings were on that point. After I had told him so, he pressed me no more; he said I had never encouraged anything beyond friendly feelings, and he would still be thankful for those, if I could give no more. He could tell Piers when he saw him again that I was still his friend, though I would not be his wife; and so that affair ended.

I do not think he was very far gone in love; at that time he liked me and would have been glad had our acquaintance led to such a feeling as might have ended in my accompanying him as his wife to India. So, after all, there was no great harm done; and I was truly glad it was so, and wished him all the success in the world in his future search for a wife. Far different

were my feelings when the time came for the walk Mr. Crofton had settled we were to take that fine afternoon. Ostensibly to chaperon Flora and her lover! How strange it all seemed, as we sauntered quietly in the park, following the two younger ones who led the way.

I could not feel at my ease with my best friend transformed into a lover. Yes, and yet it was as true as that Lord Ramsay stood in that tender relation to Flora Crofton. Still, though I regarded him with my whole heart's devotion, I felt very shy and fearful of expressing anything of that nature to him.

Mr. Crofton seemed, with his accustomed quickness, to guess my feelings, for he spoke so kindly and reassuringly, and at once to the point, that my terrible misgiving as to whether he might not already have repented of the last night's declaration was entirely removed.

"You think all this, our present relation to

each other, very strange, do not you, Marian? You are pondering whether you will be ever able to get over the feeling of respect with which my advanced age, numbering forty years, and my tutoring propensities in regard to you, have inspired you. Come, I know you like me well, for you have said so; but is it not as I have said?"

"Partly," I replied, in answer to his questioning gaze. "But the respect you speak of does not come from any disparity of years, for, in fact, there is not so much in that way, for you forget how old I am, nearly four and twenty; but I always must look up to you in every way as I have been accustomed to do since my childhood."

"Well, be it so. You will get accustomed to me and my moods by degrees, and you will soon learn to tell me when you disapprove of any of them."

"I am not likely to do that."

"Do not answer for anything rashly. Half the misery of married life, I believe, comes

from people raising too high an ideal standard before marriage, and then finding their idol is made of clay and not of gold, they are incensed and disappointed when they make the lowering discovery. No, Marian, you will find certain faults, no doubt, in me, and you must make excuses. I do not expect to find you perfect, but I know enough of you to think you will suit me perfectly."

I was glad to find his expectations were not too highly raised, and I felt sure I would try not to disappoint him. We walked on in silence for a little way, and then he said,

"You think it strange I should never have spoken to you before, or given you a hint of my feeling for you."

"Perhaps," said I, hesitating, "you might not have known it before yourself."

"Hardly that, Marian. I began to fancy I felt very dreary without you when I was away so long. Your little gentle face haunted me, and I longed to see you again, to have you coming to me as your old friend for

advice and instruction. But this is the truth —I dreaded matrimony, Marian, as the burnt child dreads the fire. I was extremely unwilling to trust it again, and I put away from me the idea that I wanted a wife to make me happy, and that wife should be yourself, till circumstances brought the truth irresistibly home. You are innocent, I may say ignorant of the world and its ways, and all your natural inclinations are pure and good. I have studied you thoroughly, and I think you will be satisfied, even though I tell you as my wife you will not be brought much more before the world than you are now. You will have ample means for the indulgence of every taste that you possess, and the gratification of every kind and generous fancy and disposition. But I want my wife for *myself*, to lead a retired, happy, domestic life with me, contented to bury her many social advantages, not seek to display them to the world. Will that content you, Marian?"

I could but give him every assurance it would be the life I most wished to lead—and with *him!*

"And now," said he, in conclusion, "I ask you to keep the fact of our engagement a secret at present. I do not wish, at this time of marrying and giving in marriage, to make a pendant to that pair of young lovers yonder. Let them first be quietly disposed of, and then, when that excitement has settled down, somewhere about the beginning of the new year, you and I may announce our intentions. Just quietly, say a week before our marriage takes place; that will give Mrs. Markham and her sister time enough for talk, and I will have everything ready in the way of settlements for signing and sealing. Will that do, my darling?"

"But how can I make my little preparations?" I asked, hesitating.

"Make none at all," was the reply. "Come to me as you are. I shall see my wife has everything afterwards she requires."

CAAPTER XIII.

BACK again in the old home!—everything looking just the same as when we left it only one month before, and yet how utterly changed were all my thoughts and feelings since then! What words can express the fulness of happiness that reigned in my heart, and coloured every object with its own bright hues! I should always be near the home I loved so well, for Mr. Crofton had told me we should live at the Hall. Everything there would go on as it had done under Mary's management. There had been a time, he said, when he thought he should be but little there after his sister and his daughter had left him solitary. It was before he had made

up his mind to ask me to be his companion there, and to take a wife in place of those from whom he was about to part. I could not help thinking that his decision was hastened by my little episode with Mr. Digby.

The small mystery that hung round our engagement seemed only then to enhance the secret joy of its actual existence. It was a very harmless concealment on my part, for there was no one to whom I was really accountable for my proceedings, and I knew that both Mrs. Markham and her sister would be only too pleased with the fact when it should be revealed to them. I could fully enter into Mr. Crofton's feelings on the subject—his dislike to all the talk and canvassing his second marriage would give rise to. And yet, once over, there was little to apprehend on that head. No one would talk—at least, to him—about his wife or his wedding. I may add I had no wish apart from his—no thought but how to please him best—no feeling but that all he designed in thought, word, and

deed, was "wisest, virtuest, discreetest, best."

I do not know whether it was from the colouring of my own mind, but it certainly struck me that both my step-mother and her sister were more pleasing and benign towards me than usual on my return home, whilst, in every way, they seemed better satisfied with me than formerly.

"So you have been staying at Lady Percival's?" said Miss Ramsay to me the morning after. "Well, you may thank me for that introduction, and a very lucky one it has been for you, for she is not a person to ask young ladies indiscriminately."

"I think this time I was indebted to Flora and her engagement to Lord Ramsay for the invitation to stay at Lady Percival's: but I am equally obliged to you for the first acquaintance."

"Yes, yes; but if she had not liked you then, she would not have asked you there with Miss Crofton, was she ever so much engaged to Ramsay. But I have a letter this morning

from Emily—Mrs. Charles Ramsay—and she says you are in high favour there."

"And did not she express her surprise, and think it was a very extraordinary thing?" I asked, laughing.

Mrs. Markham looked up at me with some surprise in her face at least, and remarked, rather drily—

"You seem to have returned in high spirits from London, Marian."

"Yes, I was so happy there, I feel the reflection of it still."

"And yet you have lost your dear friend, Miss Crofton, and now Flora is about to follow, you will find a great difference at the Hall. I don't expect Mr. Crofton will be a great deal there in future."

"Not unless he gets a wife there," said Miss Alethea, nodding her head rather mysteriously.

"Have you heard there is any chance of such an event?" I asked boldly, and well amused.

"Well," replied Mrs. Markham, "there *is* a *talk* of such a thing, but I never believe half the things people say, though in this instance the authority is good."

"May I ask, if it is not a secret, who the lady is, and who told you?"

"I daresay you will have heard more about it, if there is any truth in it, than we have; and yet, as Mr. Jones heard the report from the fountain-head, I think there must be something in it."

"Who is the lady, and where is the fountain-head, and how came Mr. Jones to know it all?" I asked.

"You know Mr. Jones attends the family at the Deanery—that was in consequence of his coming here," said Miss Alethea, "and it was there he heard about Miss Clifford and Mr. Crofton."

As I kept silence, Mrs. Markham asked—

"Have you happened to hear anything about it? You know they were all at Stornbay together this time last year, and then Mrs. Elton

told people they met in Rome at Easter, and that Sophy Clifford wrote a great deal about Mr. Crofton, and it seemed they liked the same sort of things; and she is very clever, and as we all know he is so, it did not seem unlikely that, now he will be so lonely, he might have thought of her as a wife. Have you heard anything on the subject?"

"Nothing whatever."

"Ah," said Miss Alethea, "it is my opinion Mr. Crofton will never marry, he has had enough of it, and I have an idea he will never like or trust any woman as a second wife; and then he is so clever, he can always amuse himself."

"That's all very well now," returned Mrs. Markham with a little sneer, "and then we shall hear he finishes by marrying his housekeeper, or something of that sort, some fine day."

I felt rather angry and annoyed, but did not care to pursue the subject, but knew I must make up my mind to hear all and

say nothing: it was one of the unpleasant results of my secret engagement, and as such I was content to pass it over.

"We have seen a good deal of the Eltons whilst you have been away," said Miss Alethea, a short time after to me.

"And what does Juliet say to that?"

"Oh, nothing; she is as obstinate as ever about Cyril Elton, but he has not been over himself. It is Mrs. Elton and Carrie that have been oftenest."

"Yes," said Mrs. Markham, "and it is very plain to see what they are after."

As I looked an inquiry, she continued—

"Oh, it is all Claude—Claude is everything with them. They seem quite determined to connect themselves with *my* family."

"And is Claude agreeable to it all?" I asked, wondering.

"I hardly know. He goes there a good deal. It sometimes seems to me as if he were trying to like Carrie Elton, for, though he pays her a great deal of attention, he

does not seem to me in earnest about it," said his mother with a half sigh. "I do not wonder at any girl liking or loving Claude."

"He is, no doubt, very handsome and gentlemanlike, as well as charming in manner; but I should have thought Mrs. Elton would have wanted a little more money than he has got," I answered, with newly-acquired worldly wisdom.

"Mrs. Elton knows what she is about," said Miss Alethea, with a sagacious nod of her head. "She knows Claude is first favourite with Mr. Crofton, and if he were to go away or marry and live with his wife in that great place he has somewhere in the south, then the chances are he would appoint Claude his entire agent here, with a handsome salary and the Hall to live in. Now, if by any chance he *did* marry Sophy Clifford, she would be a good help to forward such a state of things. Don't you see and comprehend?"

"I do; it is wheel within wheel," returned

I, feeling rather guilty, as if I were a spy in disguise in the enemy's camp and learning all the secrets of it. Certainly things would not have been so openly discussed had they known what I knew.

This was, however, quite a new aspect of the home affairs, and I was not sorry to hear of Claude liking Carrie Elton, or at all events of the probability or even possibility of it. It tended greatly to relieve certain undefined fears in regard to my brother that I would not give utterance to, even in my own mind—especially at that time. I should have been glad for Claude to have liked Carrie Elton, and there was plenty of time for both to think about marrying, young as they both were—Carrie could not have been more than eighteen. She was a nice little thing, not remarkably pretty, but very ladylike and taking in appearance. I was anxious to see her and Claude together, that I might make my own observations.

I saw nothing either of Mr. Crofton or

my brother till the third day after our return home, and was beginning to weary for a sight of him who had made all the world seem so bright to me, since I knew I was to pass through it at his side. At least such was then my full hope and persuasion.

On the day alluded to, Mr. Crofton (Keene, *my* Keene, as I called him in my heart), came to see us. He walked over with Claude, and Flora was also with them. In past days she had seldom walked over with her father, but I could well imagine she must feel the want of her Aunt Mary's companionship. It must have been very strange to her to be for the first time in her life tête-à-tête with her father. But was she tête-à-tête with him? Not as yet, certainly, for Mr. Crofton had kept Claude with him. He said he had many things to see into on his return home, and he could not let Claude go. There was no necessity either why he should. No doubt my brother was well pleased

to remain with his patron at the Hall.

It was very strange to me, meeting Mr. Crofton in the usual quiet, undemonstrative way peculiar to himself, after our first brief separation: and then no one could have told that we were anything to each other but the most ordinary acquaintance. Perhaps his greeting to me that morning, in the full presence of Mrs. Markham and her sister, was even more indifferent than usual; or most probably I felt it more under our peculiar circumstances. He addressed his conversation almost exclusively to the two elder ladies. Flora's first remark to me was,

"Don't you find it awfully dull here, Marian?"

"Not more so than usual."

"Ah! but having been out a little makes such a difference."

"I am not sorry to come back here, though. I have been very happy with you all, Flora. And how do you feel without——"

"Without Aunt Mary? Oh! so lost. That

is why I walked up with papa to beg the loan of Juliet. She half promised to have compassion on me on my return to solitude, and I am not going to let her off. Besides, I sent her a note last night, to say I was coming for her this morning, so I hope she means to come back with us."

"She is here to answer for herself," said I, as Juliet made her appearance.

I found my young sister had quite decided upon accepting her friend's invitation, though she had said nothing about it to me. I began to wonder whether it would be extended to me. I was soon enlightened on that point, for as our guests were about to take their leave, Mr. Crofton turned to me for the first time, and said,

"This is such a beautiful morning, it is quite a shame to stay in doors; and these October days often change; so I should advise your walking part of the way back with Flora and me."

We started all together, and then Claude

came and walked on one side of me, having much to ask, he said, about my late London experiences. Mr. Crofton naturally kept by us, but talking more to Claude than to me: whilst the two girls seemed perfectly satisfied with each other's company, and were soon lost in the distance. Then, when we had accomplished about half the distance between the Hall and my home, I said I would turn back.

"One of us ought to walk back with you," said Mr. Crofton.

Claude immediately declared his willingness to do so, when Mr. Crofton, seeming to remember something, told my brother he wanted some letter got ready for that day's post; and if he would see to it, he would chaperon me part of the way back. We all fell naturally into the proposed arrangement, and Mr. Crofton and I were thus left to ourselves. And then I found that it was for that little quiet walk that all the rest had been undertaken.

"I do not intend anyone to suspect anything about us," said he, with his quiet smile, "till we choose to tell them; and that is not to be just yet, so we must be circumspect; and I will not ask you, my darling, to come and stay at my house under our present circumstances; it was a different thing when Mary was there. *No*, I will not ask you, as I say, until you come and take up your abode there as its mistress. I shall be very careful meanwhile of you, my Marian. No one shall ever have the slighest cause to make even a remark afterwards but such as redounds to your honour. You will trust yourself and all that concerns you to my guidance?"

"You may rest very sure of that. But in regard to Juliet, you have asked her for a long visit. She will be very happy."

"Flora has, and I am glad of it, it is a very different thing with her. Juliet and I have little in common, whilst she and Flora, little as they seem to assimilate, are fast

friends: they are united in the bonds of early girlish friendship, and at this time Flora must have some one to pour out her heart to; it is her nature to do so; she is not reticent like you, or even self-sufficient like Juliet. In Ramsay's absence she must have—I won't say a substitute, but a somebody to confide in."

"And you think Juliet will fill the gap satisfactorily?" I asked, with a certain qualm of misgiving.

"We will hope so, at least. She was very desirous of having Juliet with her just now, and as I must have Claude, it is a good opportunity for the brother and sister to be with us together."

And so we talked on quietly and rationally, as we lingered in our walk till the autumn air grew crisp and chill, and Keene Crofton said reluctantly we must part.

"I shall not often treat myself thus," he said, as he held my hand in a long fervent pressure: "for I will not presume upon our

secret understanding—it would not be fair or right to do so. I shall soon claim you for my own entirely, and till I can do it openly I will not ask you to see or meet me privately, only now and then on our old footing of friendship."

Thus it was that, owing to these delicate scruples on Mr. Crofton's part, we met but seldom at that time, and I had very few opportunities of seeing how the younger members of his household got on together. There came a time afterwards when I greatly regretted that such was the case, but as things were it was impossible for me to act otherwise than I did. It was not altogether a pleasant state of things as time went on, and I found that, happy as I felt at first in the consciousness of my engagement to Mr. Crofton, I had constantly to be recalling the fact to be assured of its reality. He did not even call as often as he had been in the habit of doing, and though I knew it was because he felt it irksome to affect an indifference

towards me he did not feel, still his prolonged absences had a depressing influence on my mind. I did not find, in fact, that I was as superior to, and indifferent about all outward surroundings, as I had fancied in my actual circumstances I should be. I began even to question the policy of Mr. Crofton's conduct (I would not say the kindness) in thus keeping up a little mystery of what must so soon be known, merely because he did not like to be looked upon as an engaged man. As he so soon contemplated becoming a married one, it would not have made much difference, and I thought if our engagement was thus to divide us, I had rather he had kept the declaration for a time to himself, than have been thus unexpectedly isolated in consequence. Thus my hoarded treasure became almost burdensome to me. During one of his rare visits he seemed suddenly to become aware that something was amiss, or that I was looking ill,

or out of spirits, for he suddenly remarked to Miss Ramsay,

"What have you all been doing here since I last saw you? I do not think either Mrs. Markham or Marian are looking their best."

"Nothing ails either, that I know of. My sister complains of rheumatism, but I think she is vexed because no one from the Deanery has called here since you came back. But that is all because you keep Claude with you (which we are all delighted you should do); but you know my sister always wants something to amuse her, or she gets hipped. She is not like me, who can always find occupation and amusement for myself, and am never sick or sorry."

"No; few people have your strength of mind and body, Miss Ramsay—it is truly enviable. But I tell you what I will do—perhaps it will stir Mrs. Markham up a little—we will have the Eltons to dinner in a day or two—they shall fix an early day; and then

will you and Mrs. Markham and Marian come over to meet them?"

As there was no objection to this little plan, it was soon settled, even to naming a day, in case it suited all parties. Mr. Crofton then wished us all good-bye; but as he was leaving the room, turned and looked at me, and said,

"I should prescribe a little walk for you as well as a dinner-party; though I daresay you will find both good in their turn."

"Why don't you go at once," said Mrs. Markham, from her sofa; "really, Marian, you are getting quite idle and listless—not like what you used to be before you went to London. I really do think the visit there did you no good; I think it makes you discontented with your home—and that really is very wrong of you, Marian. Now, is it not, Mr. Crofton?"

"So wrong, that I will read her a long lecture on the subject, if she will walk a little way with me. You know, she can turn

back the instant she is tired of me and my subject."

"Well, I think it will be a very good thing, if you will really take the trouble, for Marian always minded what you and your sister said to her more than any one else. I would go too with you, but for my rheumatism; and Mr. Jones told me not to expose myself too much to the damp; and there was rain last night, or else I should really like to try a little walk."

No one was alarmed at this threatening of Mrs. Markham's company, for we knew by experience that she, as well as her sister Alethea, hated country walks, unless with some definite object in view. So, after a few more remarks from my step-mother, we were allowed, all unsuspected, to depart together.

"What is really the matter, Marian?" were his first words, spoken in a quiet, serious voice, after I had taken his arm and we had walked a little way in silence.

"Oh! nothing: only Juliet and Claude are both away, and I feel rather dull sometimes."

"Is that all?"

"Well, I very seldom see you either."

"And is there not a cause, dearest? Ah! Marian, surely it is childish to fret at such trifles: and we are both looking forward to whole years of happiness. Surely a few weeks of silence or even separation may be patiently borne. I do not trust myself to see you very often, Marian, and when I do, it goes to my heart to see you looking dull and unhappy."

"I do not feel either now," I said, not perhaps quite truly, for there was a little shade of impatience in his manner which showed a want of sympathy in my feelings that pained me; but I knew how entirely he had been accustomed to go his own way, and consult his own wishes alone, that I must expect him to do so in this case, as in all others. But I was very ready to defer my own wishes and feelings to his; and as I think I managed, in spite

of my shyness, to make that perfectly clear to him, we soon came to a very happy and amiable understanding.

And so we walked on, that fine autumn morning, talking at last with ease and freedom together. He dwelt almost laughingly on the effort he had made in proposing this party for Mrs. Markham's enlivenment, saying,

"That was quite an inspiration of mine, for when I came here, I had never dreamt of having a dinner-party. You know how much that is in my way. Nevertheless, I am very glad I thought of it, for I shall secure an evening with you, my darling; though you will not expect me to talk much to you. I fear if I were once to begin, I should devote myself to you utterly, to the consternation of all the assembled party!"

"I know you will not be likely to encounter the risk of such observation," I was beginning, a little discontentedly, when my attention was suddenly arrested by the sight of two

figures, dimly visible, at the further end of a little copse or wood we were just entering. As we had settled I was to return from that point, I stopped short in the little observation I was making, and changing the subject of my remark, I said, "I will go back now. There are some people coming, and I am sure you would rather go on without me now."

"Nonsense!" he said, vexed at my forestalling his possible objection; "I think the people about here are pretty well used to the sight of my walking now and then with you, without troubling themselves to put any new construction upon it. So, if you please, we will go on and encounter the pair."

CHAPTER XIV.

WE did so, and as the couple, on seeing us, quickened their pace as we advanced towards them, we soon perceived that it was Claude and Flora. I could not help remarking to the latter as we shook hands—

"When I saw it was Claude, I took it for granted it was Juliet with him."

"I wish it had been," answered Flora, negligently, "for I am come all this way to meet her, and have fallen in with Mr. Markham instead. Juliet is gone on some parochial business; she said she should look in on her mother and you, when she was so near, and then return by this copse, so I agreed to meet her, if I could walk so far."

"And have you come all this distance from the Hall alone?" I asked.

"Not quite," Flora answered, colouring slightly, and glancing quickly at my brother, "but the greater part of it. I hoped, when I saw you with papa, "that it might have been Juliet he was escorting, but I soon saw you were not tall enough."

"Well, if I see her on the road, I will tell her your good intentions. I must go back now. Which way are you going, Claude?"

"Oh! yours. I was going to see my mother this afternoon, and am glad I can walk back with you."

"And I shall have papa for *cavalier seul*," said Flora in a flighty manner. "Well, as I cannot have my rightful cavalier, I am, of course, very much obliged to any gentleman, old or young, that will take care of me meanwhile. I confess I am not very fond of acting the unprotected female."

This was all said to me whilst Claude was telling something to Mr. Crofton. She never

addressed any of her little flights to her father. Mr. Crofton turned round to his daughter and observed,

"You can come back with me, Flora. This is rather too far for you to walk alone. I am glad you met Claude."

Flora's saucy glance fell for a moment before her father's calm look; then, as the gentlemen exchanged some parting remark, Flora again addressed herself to me, saying—

"I wish I were as brave as you, Marian—going to walk all this way back by yourself! Oh! if I had but half your courage!"

"Perhaps you will by the time you are as old as I am."

"Ah! I forgot you were come to years of discretion; but there's Juliet, no older than I am, tramps as fearlessly all over the country as if she were some old beggar woman. I want to know why I am supposed unable to take care of myself twenty yards out of the grounds?"

"I daresay Lord Ramsay would not like you

to run the least risk, and in his absence people are bound to be doubly careful of you."

"Oh! there's the misfortune of being an 'engaged young lady.' People think you ought to be tied up before—before you are actually chained for life—to accustom you, I suppose, to the happy state of sweet slavery. Oh! Marian, don't you feel free and happy, and thank your good planets *you* are not 'an engaged young lady?'"

I felt my colour rise at Flora's heedless rattle, which, in truth, seemed very uncalled-for and unsuitable, but I was luckily spared the difficulty of finding a fitting reply by hearing her father call to her that he was going, so with a hasty "Ta, ta!" from Flora, I found myself quietly retracing my steps, with Claude as my companion.

We walked in silence some little way. I thought my brother looked worried, for his thoughts seemed far away; he used a little switch he held in his hand impatiently cutting off the heads of all the tallest plants we passed.

At length I said—"It is ages since we had a walk together, Claude. I have hardly seen you since I came home."

"No, I suppose not; I cannot be in two places at once—with the best inclinations, you know, Minnie."

He tried to turn off with a laugh something approaching to petulance in the first part of his speech; so I answered, without noticing his annoyance—

"Have you really so very much business on your hands now, Claude, that you are never able to come home?"

"I *have* a great deal to do, one way or another, and that man John Forest tries to thwart me in every way by making difficulties where there would be none, hoping to expose my deficiencies."

"It is lucky for you, Claude, that Mr. Crofton is as discriminating as he is kind; so he knows what to believe in Mr. Forest's representations—I mean when they are opposed to yours."

"Oh! we don't often enter into open warfare. It would be better if we did, if he would speak out plainly, and say what he means at times, and then I should have my answer ready."

"At all events it must be a comfort to you, Claude, to know that Mr. Crofton thoroughly *trusts* you—that he knows whatever you do for him and his is with the best, the truest intentions."

As I said this I came near Claude, and put my hand through his arm, which hung listlessly down, and looked up in his beautiful eyes, trying to see into their very depths. He did not seem angry with me then; he pressed my hand to his side saying,

"Good Minnie! dear Minnie! never fear for me. He shall never have cause to repent the trust he puts in me. I would rather pluck my heart out than let it betray me into any breach of trust towards him."

His eyes were then turned lovingly and kindly down upon me, so I ventured to say,

"And is it true about you and Carrie Elton, dear?"

"Who has been talking nonsense to you, Minnie?"

"I hope it is *not* nonsense; and I heard your mother say——"

"Say what?"

"That you liked each other."

"I hope we do. I like Carrie Elton extremely. I like all the Eltons; but if you mean anything serious, why, it would be nonsense in me. Why, who would marry a pauper like me?"

"She would if she loved you, for you have an increasing salary from Mr. Crofton, and I daresay he will make it more yet," said I, encouragingly, thinking how pleasant it would be to be able to help Claude, as I was sure Mr. Crofton would give me the power of doing when I became his wife; and for the first time speculating to myself on some of the pleasures which riches might bestow, I forgot how little Claude could guess the feeling which

prompted my remark, and his answer recalled me from my inner life and expectations to the more visible state and condition of things as they appeared to him.

"It is very well for you to think so, Minnie, but I always feel that I already receive more than I am worth. Mr. Crofton is all kindness and generosity to me, but I can assure you I look for and expect no further increase to my salary. So please do not say anything of the kind to my mother, or Aunt Alethea; they might begin to fancy it my due, and *I* know it is not. Furthermore, I am much better acquainted with Mr. Crofton than any of you can be, and if they said anything of the kind to him I feel sure it would disgust him, after all he has done for me, and very justly too. Besides, there is no man in the world shrinks from anything like dictation more decidedly than he does; so rest satisfied with me and my position at present. I have not the least idea of marrying for years to come, and most likely never at all."

I felt just then I should have liked to have been able to tell Claude of my happy prospects, and the reason why I looked so hopefully upon his; but as that was a joy denied to me, I could say nothing more on that subject, so I ventured on another.

"Had you a nice walk with Flora to-day, Claude?"

He answered, I thought, with studied indifference.

"Nice! yes, as far as it went, but it was very short."

"What, all that distance from the Hall?"

"I thought she told you she met me a little way back. I was coming from the home farm, where I had been to give a message from Mr. Crofton, and she met me where the two roads run into a point, a little before you get to the copsefield. It was lucky she fell in with her father, or she would have had to walk back alone."

"Or perhaps have gone on with you till you met Juliet."

"I cannot tell you, for we had not had time to discuss the subject in all its bearings."

Claude spoke rather impatiently, and quickened his steps as he did so. We were just turning in at the nearest gate to our home, so I only asked one more question.

"Is any day fixed yet for the wedding?"

"You had better ask Miss Crofton herself. She has never told me."

"Dear Claude," said I, as we walked up to the door, "I do not mean to tease you with questions, only seeing so much of them all, I thought the subject might have been discussed; and I know it is to be some time next month, but I do not know the day."

"Well, Minnie, ask Mr. Crofton the next time you see him, and I am sure he will tell you—if he knows himself."

Claude's visit that day was very well timed—his mother had began to want to see him again, and was besides very full of Mr. Crofton's

invitation to dinner, which, from its being a rare occurrence, became a matter of importance, deserving much discussion and conjecture as to various circumstances connected with it.

Claude acquitted himself very well—he listened patiently and good-naturedly to all his mother's remarks; but that he always did, let her be ever so tiresome, as she often was. He was quite ready to afford her all the information in his power, as to the probable strength of the party Mr. Crofton might be able to muster, and how many of the Eltons were at home, and who would be likely to accept the invitation. Then she wound up all by saying to me,

"I wonder he did not ask you to stay—perhaps he will. If he does, you can go. I don't want you to stay at home if you find it dull; and you and Juliet might make a little change now. I don't mind asking Mr. Crofton—we are such old friends."

I was in such a state of apprehension

lest my step-mother might do as she proposed, intending it by way of a kindness, that I suppose my entreaties that she would not do so were rather stronger than the apparent occasion demanded, for she looked up in surprise, and asked if I had had any quarrel with Flora when in London; or perhaps Mr. Crofton might have taken some little offence with me there—he had a queer temper of his own, she knew, though a charming person to those he liked; and she did think it very kind of him to give a party on purpose for her. But, then, perhaps that was not so astonishing, as they were so soon to become so nearly connected, and that of course would account for his asking Juliet without me. I was nothing to them, but Juliet would soon be Flora's cousin, as well as friend—and Claude, too, he would be a near relative—"So near, that I daresay he will double your salary, Claude, unless Ramsay gets you some good appointment.

Between them, I consider your fortune made, and so does Mrs. Elton, for she has said as much to me."

Claude had need of all his patience, as well as me, to hear this tirade all to the end. But he was far happier than me, for at the end of it he could go away. And that he did, kindly kissing his mother, as was his wont; and then with a nod to his aunt and me, he took his leave.

We saw nothing more of our friends at the Hall till the day for the dinner-party came; and then Mr. Crofton sent a carriage for us, as our own would only accommodate two. It was a kind attention on his part, which Mrs. Markham duly appreciated, and appropriated as due to their approaching relationship.

Mr. Crofton had been engaged a good deal, I knew, from the time we last met, as he told me he expected a friend—one of his London literary acquaintances, who was coming down for a week or two for a little shoot-

ing and other recreation. I had never seen Mr. Ellismere, and was pleased with his appearance and manner. When introduced to him, there was something peculiarly interesting to me just then in seeing any friend, especially an early one, of Keene Crofton's. It was like a little glimpse into the history of those past days hitherto so closely sealed; and, strange to say, this Mr. Ellismere was the first guest I had ever seen, or heard of, as staying at the Hall since Mr. Crofton took up his abode there.

Mrs. Markham in black velvet and point lace, and making one again of a large pleasant dinner party, was in good looks and good spirits; and Miss Ramsay, though less magnificently attired, was equally satisfied with herself and her surroundings. The Eltons were the principal guests there, their party consisted of the Dean with his wife and youngest daughter. In place of one of the others, came Miss Clifford, who had invited herself to stay at her aunt's, and seemed delighted with this opportunity of

renewing her acquaintance with Mr. Crofton and—"Flora"—no doubt!

Captain Elton was also there, and brought a friend with him. The person I was most surprised to see on the occasion was my cousin, Luke Dillon, thinking he had foresworn every sort of social amusement. I found my feelings were shared by Miss Alethea, who called him to her side during the short time that preceded the announcement of dinner. Luke obeyed her summons, quietly asking her how she was; she replied she was quite well, but much astonished at meeting him that day and at that time.

"Indeed," said Luke quite unmoved, "this is by no means the first time I have partaken of Mr. Crofton's kind hospitality; I have often dined here, especially of late."

"You surprise me, I candidly confess, for it was my firm belief that you never entered into society at all."

Luke smiled, a little wintry sort of smile, and then asked,

"Why should you have condemned me to the hermit's cell, Miss Ramsay?"

"Nay! it is not *me* that would have done so on any account; I am always for mixing with my fellow-creatures, and enjoying myself as long as I can: but did not you advise my niece Juliet to cut parties in general, and never go out anywhere except to the school and cottages?"

"It is impossible for me to enter into so grave a discussion just now, Miss Ramsay, involving, too, so many varieties of circumstances and situations in life. I certainly object to parties where there is great loss of time, and often distraction of mind, but of which I can speak from hearsay alone, not having mingled therein myself. I also protest against *habitual* gaiety, under whatever guise it may present itself; but occasionally, after the toils and duties of the day have been scrupulously discharged, I see no harm in sitting down to meat in a friend's house, especially such a friend as Mr. Crofton has been to me." Then, seeing Miss

Ramsay was about to reply, Luke made a little deprecatory gesture as if he had not quite ended his sentence, and went on, "I should be sorry indeed if by my coming here I should give rise to any to speak lightly of me or of my profession, and therefore I wish it to be clearly understood I see no evil in so doing. Are you content with my explanation?"

"Oh, more than content," returned Miss Ramsay, lifting both her hands as if to stem the quiet flow of Luke's words, delivered with much precision. "You are just like the rest of the world, Mr. Dillon; you extra good people can always find some excellent reason for doing everything you wish to do, and avoiding what you don't like, or don't care to do. I daresay we are all right enough in our own eyes, however faulty we may be in our neighbour's. There, 'dinner's on the table,' and that's the pleasantest speech I have heard, though the shortest, since I came into this house."

Luke was in no ways disconcerted with Miss Alethea's rebuff, nor in truth do I see any

reason why he should have been so. His faithful ally, Juliet, was standing at her aunt's elbow ready to support him had he required such aid, but Luke was quite equal to taking his own part; however, he rewarded her approving looks by offering his arm to take her in to dinner, where they both appeared contented with themselves and with each other. My companion at that day's dinner was the Mr. Ellismere I have mentioned; he was brought up to me by Mr. Crofton, who I well knew had his own especial reasons for consigning me to the care of his old friend. He knew how pleasant such an introduction must be to me, not only from the agreeable nature of Mr. Ellismere's conversation, but because of the interest I should feel in talking to one who had been intimate so many years with himself, and appreciated his sister Mary as she deserved.

I had fancied before we came that I might find this dinner-party at Mr. Crofton's house, under our peculiar circumstances, not only strange, but trying and unpleasant. I dreaded

lest, in his endeavour to be cool and indifferent in his behaviour to me that evening, that I should feel hurt and unhappy—perhaps oppressed with a sensation of unkindness and neglect, and altogether that I might not be able to keep up a semblance of such cheerful contentment as he might expect and desire from me.

Nothing of the kind, however, took place. Mr. Crofton was considerate and unobtrusively attentive to me beyond my hopes or expectations. He brought his friend up to me, and then lingered beside us till he had brought us in some degree acquainted and disposed to like each other. I could but admire and love him the more for the kindness and delicate tact he showed on the occasion; he made me feel that I was in his thoughts all that evening, and a very happy one it was in consequence, and destined to be marked with a white stone ever after.

I looked with considerable interest on Carrie Elton, whom everyone seemed to have destined to become Claude's wife. I watched her as he

came near her after dinner, when the gentlemen joined us in the drawing-room. I looked in the young girl's face, and there was no doubt as to her feelings. It was a nice, soft, gentle face, with large brown eyes, and shaded by soft luxuriant hair of the same colour. The features were by no means regular, though the expression was good-tempered and pleasing. Flora soon went and sat by her, and then Claude came and joined them, and they all looked very happy and well-amused. I wondered whether Lord Ramsay was missed, his beautiful *fiancée* seemed so perfectly contented in his absence. But then she knew, in the course of less than a month, he would return to claim her as his own for "*ever*," though I sometimes fancied Flora was half frightened at the solemn sound of that word—at all events, she was not pining for her betrothed.

There was music that evening, and some German games Flora had brought back with her; but as they were played with cards, Luke drew back, and Juliet, in humble imitation, did

the same, and then they talked together a little apart. The Dean had his little rubber of whist, in which the two elder ladies, as well as his wife, joined; and then Mr. Crofton was at liberty, and he and his friend drew near me, and Miss Clifford, who talked to both when she was not singing and playing. Of course Captain Elton and his friend joined the young ladies' coterie, and very merry they seemed.

I remember looking round on the various happy groups assembled in the drawing-room that evening, and feeling it might possibly be the last "visit" I should pay there—that, with the exception of Flora's wedding-day, I might never enter its doors again until I came there as my home—a strange, strange bewildering dream of happiness that I should be ever with *him* there, and my cup of earthly joy would indeed be full! I did not at that moment think of the old proverb respecting the cup and the lip. But the vision of the drawing-room at the Hall that evening seemed to stereotype itself upon my memory as my last lingering look dwelt upon it.

CHAPTER XV.

WE had a visit from Mr. Crofton and his friend about a week after our dinner-party at the Hall. He then told us Mr. Ellismere was going away in a couple of days, and that it was his intention to go up to London with him.

"Therefore," said he to Mrs. Markham, "Flora intends calling here to-morrow and returning you your young lady, with many grateful thanks for the loan of her pleasant company these last few weeks."

"Oh! then you take Flora with you? Well, that will be a subject of rejoicing to our nephew Ramsay."

"No; Flora is bound in another direction;

she has promised to spend a farewell week with the Eltons. Mrs. Elton and her daughters seemed so anxious she should, that I gave my consent—in fact, I am glad of the opportunity it gives me of running up to London for a few days. There are two or three things require my presence there just now; if I had not gone now, I must directly after the wedding is over."

"Oh! do tell us, Mr. Crofton—is *the* day fixed yet?"

"Not absolutely, I believe, as yet, but I have no doubt it will be as soon as I return, and Flora comes back from the Deanery. I heard from Lord Ramsay this morning, and he is very desirous that the day should be named."

"And what says Flora?" I asked, speaking for the first time to Mr. Crofton. He turned quickly round to me, though the question was put so low I hardly thought he heard, and answered,

"Flora says everything will be settled—the day and the hour included—after her

return home, when she will have had full time and opportunity for consultation with the Miss Eltons, who have promised, as you know, to be bridesmaids."

"And who is to perform the ceremony?" asked Miss Ramsay.

"I believe we are to have the Dean, and our own clergyman. Two being thought necessary, it seems, to tie the knot securely."

"For my part, I should prefer only one," said I, thoughtlessly, and for the moment entirely forgetful of my own prospects. Mr. Crofton only smiled, and replied quietly, "So should I," which made me regret extremely that I had given an opinion on the subject. No one happily observed my confusion, for Mrs. Markham was busily talking to Mr. Ellismere, and Miss Alethea, as unsuspicious as anyone could desire, took up the remark as addressed to herself, and observed,

"That is all very well on some occasions. I daresay if ever *I* were to be foolish enough to marry—which heaven forbid!—I should think

one clergyman amply sufficient for the occasion; but it is quite different with your daughter and my nephew. Nothing is too much for such a perfect marriage as that. If I had had anything to do with it, I should have liked to have asked the Archbishop of York to have performed the ceremony. You could not have too much *éclat* attending that wedding."

"Well, I hope Ramsay will be satisfied with a more simple style of proceeding. Neither Flora nor I are much in the way of great doings; but it will not be so difficult for her to change her style hereafter, should her husband desire it, as it would be for me. So I am afraid, Miss Ramsay, you must put up with a very quiet wedding. Your welcome will not be the less warm on the occasion," he added, courteously; and then, seeming to have had enough of the subject, he began talking to his friend about the beauty of the view from a certain point of the grounds, and partly discernible from the

window near which Mr. Ellismere was standing.

It was then early in November, but the trees had not quite lost their autumn foliage, and the day was mild and soft, with that sort of haze in the air which, whilst it does not actually obscure a prospect, gives every object in it a misty and uncertain outline, and by softening certain points, and fusing others together, invest them with a kind of mysterious beauty and undefined charm. Something of that sort was the case on the day I speak of, and Miss Ramsay being persuaded to accompany the gentlemen to the spot in question, as a matter of course I went also. Dead leaves strewed the ground on every side in mournful profusion, filling the heavy autumn air with that peculiar scent which, though by no means unpleasant, is yet often accompanied by a sensation of sadness and decay.

There was something contagious, I suppose, in the weight of the atmosphere, for I was

conscious of a sorrowful sinking of heart and spirits, as I stood side by side with one who, though my unavowed lover (in the sight of the world), was yet my own betrothed, how dearly loved and how fondly prized no words could tell. Yet in the full persuasion that a few months, it might be weeks, would see us united for life, yet I was not happy. I was oppressed by that sensation best described as "a stone in the heart," which weighed it down with a sort of sick foreboding of evil, which I could neither control nor account for. Meanwhile Miss Ramsay walked on and chatted away for entertainment of her visitor, Mr. Ellismere, whilst Mr. Crofton and I wandered over the well-known ground, stopping when they stopped, and moving on in conformity with their progress, yet keeping ever near, though in the background.

"It will not do to walk on," Mr. Crofton said, after a long pause. "I will not ask you, for Miss Ramsay will not stir a step beyond her

tether: and after she has exhausted all her talk on subjects of local interest, she will return to the house. She never walks beyond the grounds (unless bent on some domestic mission), and when she bids us farewell, you too, my Marian, must go with her."

"Must I? Can't I go a little way with you and Mr. Ellismere for my usual walk?"

"No, no, darling, I will not ask you now. I could not talk comfortably to you. I should be wishing Ellismere away."

"And me too," I added, half laughing in spite of my depression. "Well, you can tell me to go, more conveniently than Mr. Ellismere, so as soon as Miss Alethea is ready, I will say good-bye."

"Will you always be as ready to obey even before you are asked, my Marian?" he asked, looking fondly down and smiling upon me as I stood by him; whilst Miss Ramsay, a little in advance, was expatiating on the wide expanse of view from that particular point on the hill side.

I was raking the dead leaves together in a little heap with the point of my parasol, and occasionally rolling a pebble to the side of the walk, from whence it fell down with a little splash into the still stream beneath; and as he spoke, the question arose whether I should or not. But my mind was soon made up, and desisting from my employment, I looked up fearlessly in his face and answered,

"Yes, I will."

"And if you find me unreasonable, tiresome, capricious?"

"I will tell you when that time comes. I trust it never will. Please tell me now, when will you return?"

"In a week, at farthest, you may depend on me, dearest; for though we meet but seldom, it is pleasant to feel you are near to me, within reach any day, or at any time. And is not that your feeling also, Marian?"

"Yes—in part—with a difference."

"And what is that?"

"Why" (with a little hesitation), "you can come and see *me* whenever you like, and I can only see *you* when you please."

"I confess that does make a little difference," he answered, with a slight smile; and then added, "And is that the reason why you are looking so grave to-day?"

"Am I?—I did not know it. But I do feel a little dull, I believe. Don't mind it, please—it is only because the day is rather dismal too."

"Well, now you have finished making that little heap of withered leaves, we may as well move on. Ellismere will follow, I daresay: and I must be returning home—I have a good deal to say to Claude before I go."

"He continues to do as well as ever?" I asked, rather anxiously; and was relieved by the promptness of Mr. Crofton's reply—

"Better even, I think; and as he and Forest get to understand each other better, they will work more perfectly together."

"They are very different."

"I should hope so—I want them for very different purposes. One is my friend, the other my servant—both I believe excellent in their way."

"But if they should pull different ways?"

"Then it would remain for me to decide which is the right way; but I am fully satisfied at present with both, and trust to remain so. By-and-by I shall have another voice to consult in the management of all my affairs."

"A very feeble one, I fear."

"Well, I am quite contented with it as it is; but the chances are, it will get stronger in time."

In reply to this, I could only shake my head, and say,

"I fear—I fear——"

"Nonsense!—nonsense!—there, scatter your fears as I scatter these to the winds!" as he passed his cane lightly through my heap of dead leaves, and sent them flying through the

autumn air—"there, they are all gone, you see."

"Yes, like withered hopes and aspirations, which were once green and flourishing as those leaves when they were bright and young."

"I hope you are not beginning to draw such doleful comparisons as to our hopes and expectations, which, Heaven knows, are young enough as yet, and tender too!" he said, with an earnest look in my face, as if to read there whether I was in jest or earnest.

I felt sad at heart, however, for no visible or tangible cause or reason. The short separation was not enough to account for the sensation. I knew Mr. Crofton must return very shortly, for he left his daughter behind, and I was sure her marriage must very shortly take place. He was to see Lord Ramsay in town, and he would no doubt urge the matter; and Flora was quite prepared, I knew, to fix the day at last. And

after that there was a certainty of such happiness in the distance, and yet approaching so rapidly, that I could only wonder at its falling to my own portion. Away then with fears and misgivings of every kind, for never had Mr. Crofton seemed more kind, more devoted, than on that day, so I would be happy in his absence if I could. This I said to him as well as thought, when he held my hand in a farewell, lingering clasp, and whispered,

"May God bless you, my darling!—you are too timid, too sensitive! But never fear, there is no one that can come between you and me. We hold our own destinies in our own hands. Our happiness is not the less certain because for certain reasons we have delayed the announcement of it to others. I do not fear any objections being raised when our intentions are made more widely known; nor do you, I think?"

"Oh! no, I have no fears of that kind—everything rests with you," I replied, as I lifted

my eyes to that face which was daily becoming dearer and dearer to my heart and my imagination.

"Then farewell, and be happy, my darling, for I love you now as I believe I never loved any woman before."

Those were Keene Crofton's last words, for Mr. Ellismere and Miss Ramsay came up, and we parted then and there. As they walked away, Miss Alethea and I turned our steps homewards. It was no great distance, but it seemed to have become suddenly very chilly and dreary, and the only difficulty was in the pre-occupied state of my thoughts to command sufficient attention to reply at correct intervals to Miss Ramsay's flow of questions and observations with which she enlivened our walk back to the house.

I always dreaded being a third with Mrs. Markham and her sister at that time, for since my engagement to Mr. Crofton I had an uneasy feeling as of disengenuousness when listening to their remarks, relating either to him-

self or his affairs. They thought so little of me or of my opinion, that they expressed their opinions very freely in my presence. It was not that they disliked Mr. Crofton—far from it, they would have said he was a favourite with both. Nevertheless, there were no end of censorious little remarks they indulged in in commenting on their rich and prosperous neighbour. These animadversions had nothing malicious in them, but proceeded entirely, I believe, from a small feeling of jealousy which minds of a certain order are apt to entertain against those whose position in life happens to be more fortunate than their own. Thus these two ladies were ever taking upon themselves to decide that Mr. Crofton did too much in some respects, and too little in others, and so on, *ad infinitum*. All this was very trying to me, and in those long dark days there was often no escape, when the conversation in the evening took that turn.

The approaching marriage and prospective connexion between the two families made Mr.

Crofton's affairs a very favourite topic at that time. Any attempt on my part to stem the tide or divert the current of their remarks was worse than useless, and was always put aside with cool contempt, as coming from one whose opinion was worth nothing, especially as, in their view of the matter, I was not likely to benefit by the contemplated alliance, not having the honour of being a Ramsay on my mother's side.

Flora brought back Juliet according to promise, and she was received with every demonstration of affectionate interest by her future aunts. Miss Alethea, who prided herself on her candour, took an opportunity of asking Flora whether the important day was fixed, observing it was high time it should be, as all Lord Ramsay's nearest relations were of course all anxiety about it, so she hoped Flora would candidly tell her when the wedding-day was to be. Flora's brow contracted for a moment, and then she laughed in her sweet low way, and answered,

"As soon as papa returns home, and has seen Lord Ramsay, I have promised to settle the day. He may have a thousand things to settle, so it would not do to fix it and then to say it is altered, because Lord Ramsay is not quite ready."

"No fear of that, my dear Flora," said Mrs. Markham, joining in; "you must know no day you might appoint could be too early for Ramsay—if you were to say to-morrow even."

"Which, happily, there is no chance of my doing," broke in Flora, with something like flippancy in her tone; "for I am otherwise engaged, and very pleasantly too, I hope, for the next week or so; but," seeming to recollect herself, "you may be sure, dear Mrs. Markham, my friends here shall be the first to be informed, when anything is settled."

"Well, we must be content meanwhile with that; and now, as you are all going away, I suppose we may expect Claude at home in the evening. Do you happen to know whether he will be at liberty then?"

"Oh, Mr. Markham! I am sure I don't know what his plans or engagements may be: but I daresay he can do just as he likes. By the way, I think Mrs. Elton said something about her wanting him to go for a day or two to the Deanery; but I am not sure."

"Oh, yes, I daresay you are right; and no doubt if he can he will go there, so I must not mind sparing him," said Mrs. Markham with a little sigh: and then added, "It is all on Carrie's account, I imagine, don't you?"

Flora stooped to pick up a glove she had dropped, and then said rather absently,

"Oh, no doubt—yes, it is all on Carrie's account."

CHAPTER XVI.

IT was pleasant to have Juliet at home again. I felt a new interest in her since her long visit at the Hall. I imagined she must have reaped much benefit from having been quietly domesticated there with Flora and her father, and drawn more than she had ever been before into the searching light of Mr. Crofton's daily observation. I even fancied I could trace the good effects, in various ways, in an improved style of speaking and in her general manner; there was more moderation, too, in her tone, and rather more deference to the opinions of others. She told me Luke Dillon had been frequently at the Hall. Mr. Crofton encouraged his visits. There being no gaiety then to alarm him when he was asked, and Juliet

said Mr. Crofton approved of, entered with interest into many of his new plans and designs, and, furthermore, had supplied the means of carrying them out.

It pleased me sometimes to fancy that Mr. Crofton regarded the young clergyman with such peculiar favour, as being so near a relation of my own, though I knew that consideration would not have sufficed alone. Still, I could not help thinking that Luke, with all his merits, might yet owe something to that. I could not find out from Juliet whether she and Luke had advanced a stage beyond their old friendship. I wished on her account they might come to a better understanding, and that he would recognize in her something tenderer and dearer than the village schoolmistress, or hard-working curate, whose place she had hitherto so well supplied. It was pleasant to look forward and think that when the happy time came that I should be settled at the Hall myself, I might give a little judicious assistance towards the desired end. At the same time, I wonder-

ed a little at Juliet's choice, but thought it fortunate that in the variety of tastes there were in the world, even my cousin Luke could find someone to think him charming in every respect.

These considerations gave me an increasing interest in my young sister's affairs; and on her part, she was pleased with my sympathy and ready interest in her occupations. She little suspected with what avidity I listened to all she told me, as to what Mr. Crofton was thinking of doing in the spring, and how Mr. Dillon was indebted to his kindness, in a thousand ways unknown to me till then. I asked her one day,

"And what does Flora say to all these things? I am afraid she would not listen with the interest you did whilst they were under discussion."

"Oh, I assure you Flora can be very serious at times; more so than she used to be in the old days. You know how nicely she designs and draws. She had made such charming plans

for the new model cottages Mr. Crofton is going to build, and she told Claude he must see they were carried out, when—when——"

"Well? when what?"

"I suppose she meant after she was married and gone away."

"Her father is the person to see to that, I think, and not Claude: besides, I thought it was Luke's business, not Claude's."

"It will be Mr. Dillon's, no doubt, when they are finished; but you know Mr. Crofton makes Claude look after everything. If any building is going on, he is always going over to report progress."

"What did Mr. Crofton say to Flora's cottages?"

"Oh, he rather laughed at them, and said they were too pretty to inhabit; but advised her to try them at her new home—with Lord Ramsay's permission. I was very glad to hear him say that, because I think it so desirable Flora should have such occupations and interests there, don't you think so, Marian?"

"It does not much signify what we think on the matter; but you may make yourself quite easy for your friend Juliet in thinking she will be in the best possible hands, and will be far better advised about all desirable and charitable objects than by either you or I."

"Yes, but I do not think she likes to think of Lord Ramsay in that way; she is always saying—that is when she speaks of him to me—that he is 'awfully' clever and good and sensible, and then she says he is so much older than her. It is only her way, you know, in his absence, to talk so, for fear people should say she is desperately in love, and could not do without him, or anything of that kind."

"Well, there would be no harm in that, seeing they are to be married within a month."

"I believe that is the very reason why Flora goes on in that funny way sometimes—because it *is* so near; and so she declares she shall say and do whatever she pleases whilst she has her liberty; but, as I tell you, she is often very quiet, almost sad at times, and I am sure, in her heart,

as fond of Lord Ramsay as she ought to be."

"I really do not see, then, why she should not be honest about it. It would be far nicer and more natural in her not to make any silly pretences as to not caring and thinking about Lord Ramsay whilst he is away. I do like people to be candid and truthful."

"Like Aunt Alethea," said Juliet, laughing; "but really you must not take up anything I say against poor Flora. We all know it is only her way of talking, and I daresay she is as honest and truthful as most people—even as you yourself, Marian."

I started as Juliet said that, for I knew I had my own important reservations at that very time, all unsuspected as they might be; still, I was in some measure acting a part, and, though it was in compliance with the wishes of another, it made me feel I was not quite the open, honest person just then I so rigidly desired every one else to be; so I held my tongue and refrained from further comments on Flora:

but in a few moments Juliet returned to the subject, observing—

"I think Flora is the best tempered person I ever knew. You cannot think how gentle and how kind she is when Claude gets into one of his queer moods."

"Claude in queer moods!" I returned, in the utmost astonishment. "Why, you do surprise me now, Juliet. If you had said Flora's queer moods I should not have wondered. But Claude, whose good nature is quite proverbial, and whose temper from a child was the sweetest in the world! And as if Mr. Crofton would be always praising him as he does, if Claude indulged in such freaks of temper!"

"Hush, hush, Marian dear! pray do not repeat what I have just said—especially before Mr. Crofton. He never sees Claude in those moods; no one but Flora and me know how odd he is at times, and she puts up with him, and is so forbearing and so kind."

"Too kind, perhaps," I muttered, and then

said, "How long has Claude indulged in these caprices of temper?"

"I hardly know; he is very much altered lately. I think he is getting quite spoilt. Mr. Crofton consults him, and looks up to Claude, and sets him up over everybody else; and I think perhaps he is too young and undisciplined to bear it," replied Juliet, in one of her sententious sentences.

"But how does he show his temper and want of—of—discipline, as you call it?"

"It is not *my* word, Marian, it is Mr. Dillon's. He says we all want teaching in the school of sorrow to become properly disciplined. Now, as Claude leads a very happy self-indulgent life at the Hall, he has never passed through that training."

"Then surely he has nothing to ruffle his temper, and I do not understand how he manages to show it to Flora and you and no one else."

"No, I daresay not, and it is very difficult to describe. It is more irritability of manner than

of words in general, though sometimes it is both."

"Can't you give me an instance?"

"Well—yes—it was only the other day Claude had been taking the greatest pains and trouble about breaking in a young horse Mr. Crofton has given to Flora. She is to take it with her to that new place, you know, where they are going to live. He seemed delighted to do it for her, or rather for Mr. Crofton; and you know how perfectly he rides—what a seat, and what a hand he has upon a horse!—much better than Lord Ramsay's, I allow: but that is part of his nature as a young Yorkshireman. Well, he had almost broken this creature, when it set up with him one day, and though it could not get him off, it sprained his wrist; he did not complain of it, but we all saw what pain he was in, and when we got to the house, Flora, who was quite upset with his having so much trouble on her account, brought some eau de cologne and tore up one of her handkerchiefs to bind up his wrist, but the instant she touched it he turned quite

pale, and then looked as red and angry as possible, and said in the rudest way,

"You hurt me, and make it much worse—here, Juliet, just tie your own handkerchief any way round my wrist, so that I can use my hand. I want nothing else;" then he turned away from Flora and made me do it. I was quite vexed, for the tears came into her eyes. She did not speak, but let me do it for Claude without a word: and then he left the room without looking at her, or even thanking her."

"Quite right," I muttered again, but only said,

"Men hate people making a fuss about them; so I can quite fancy he preferred his sister to do what was needful, instead of troubling Miss Crofton."

"Ah, but he often behaves in that way, especially to Flora; but I love Claude too well to wish anyone to know it: and I daresay now he will be more at home, he will learn to control his temper and be more like his nice, dear old self again; and you, Marian, have always had more influence over him than any one else—so

I do not mind telling you—and I know it is safe with you; you are not likely to mention it to Mr. Crofton, and you might perhaps give Claude a little useful hint now and then."

I had another little twinge of conscience at Juliet's speech, but felt unspeakably glad that Claude was likely to be more at home, and would not return to his perilous position at the Hall, till the danger of it had passed away.

I had all the opportunity of seeing Claude that I could have desired at that time. He came home every day and dined with us, often staying the night, when he had no very early work to do at the Hall. He seemed glad to be amongst us again, though nothing could be quieter than the life we were leading at that time. He was very gentle and very kind to everybody, and I could hardly understand upon what grounds Juliet had made her accusations, and yet I knew enough of her entire truthfulness and integrity to be sure she would not have talked of the brother she loved so well in the manner she had done without some foundation. At

times I observed Claude had a wearied preoccupied look that had not been natural to him: but I remembered he was now a man, with cares and responsibilities upon his mind, and that in proportion to the entire trust reposed in him by his employer, so much the greater must be the anxiety of honourably and honestly discharging the same.

Thus I was not surprised when he would sometimes sit, silent and evidently preoccupied, in our little family circle. We could have no pleasant gossiping strolls in the evening after dinner then. The shutters were closed early, and we dined at six, so there were many hours to dispose of, as we best might. I believe they were often very wearisome hours to Mrs. Markham, whose eyesight was not as good as it used to be, and who disliked needle-work of every kind. Miss Ramsay's eyes were still strong and vigorous, and as she did not disdain the use of spectacles by candle light, she found plenty of amusement in the long evenings, as did Juliet and I.

Claude generally took up a book or a newspaper after he followed us into the drawing-room, which he did always very quickly; but when I glanced towards him, I often saw it dropped on his knee, and his eyes and thoughts far otherwise employed. Sometimes Mrs. Markham would try to engage her son in conversation, but, as that consisted in asking a string of unmeaning questions, after those had been disposed of to the best of Claude's abilities, it soon languished and then came to an end.

I could not help seeing that Claude was not in his former gay spirits, but as he said nothing to me, and I never saw him alone, I had no opportunity of ascertaining whether anything was at the time particularly worrying him. Neither could I detect any of the irritability or want of temper in his intercourse with his family that Juliet had described to me.

It happened one day that Mrs. Markham asked Miss Jones to dine with us, as well as our young Rector, and then it chanced that Mr. Jones called an hour or two before dinner, so

he was also invited to join the party. It was not often that the little doctor dined at the Manor-house, nor, indeed, was Mrs. Markham at any time given to much hospitality. On the present occasion I imagine that our Rector and Miss Jones were both asked to please (as she supposed) Juliet on her return home, and it might be she considered Luke's society would prove enlivening to Claude; and when Mr. Jones was asked to stay and dine, it was, I believe, for her own individual satisfaction. He seemed duly sensible of the pleasure and honour conferred upon him, as, after having divested himself of his wraps, he stood in front of the cheerful fire rubbing and warming his hands over the genial blaze.

"Well, this is a pleasure I little anticipated when I left home this morning, to find myself in the midst of such a charming party this evening, instead of returning home to my solitary tea and chop. It is really very kind of you, Mrs. Markham, and to have me in all my *déshabille*. It is a long time, too, since I have

seen the young ladies or Mr. Claude," said the little doctor, turning his beaming countenance upon us all in rotation, adding—"And they all look as if they did not want to see me."

"Happily not in *that* way, doctor," replied Claude, good-humouredly; "but we are all very glad to see you in *this* way."

"Thank 'ee, sir—thank 'ee; and I can only hope it may be long before you require me in the other. It is a fine thing to be young. I catch myself saying that the oftener the older I grow. No one cares much about it whilst they *are* young, I believe—children want to be men, and old men want to be youths again."

"Human nature, sir—we see it in every state and condition of life; we all want something we can't have, and think lightly of that we have got," observed Luke, sententiously; whilst Juliet endorsed the remark by saying, and with some experience as applied to herself—

"That is very true. I really believe a thing appears the more desirable from its unattainability."

"Ah! my dear young lady, that may be, because you are not near enough to see the flaws you are apt to discover on closer acquaintance," observed Mr. Jones, sagaciously.

"Then," said Claude, laughing, "your doctrine would reconcile one to a distant view of any coveted possession: there is nothing more unpleasant than being compelled to see the imperfections of *l'objet aimée*."

I looked at Claude as he said this, and wondered whether his thoughts rested on any particular object, or were only of general application. It was during the course of that evening that, owing to a question put by our little doctor to Claude, I heard of a contemplated party at the Deanery, to which, it seemed, he was invited, and, furthermore, it appeared, intended to be present.

"You never told us of these gay doings, Claude," said his sister.

"No—why should I? You care for none of those things, you know—or, at least, you profess you do not, so I could not tell you would

have any interest in the matter, unless, indeed, you and Marian are thinking of joining this said party yourselves."

"That is hardly likely," said I, "seeing we have received no invitation."

"Oh! if that is all, I daresay you could easily get one. I feel sure they would all be glad to see you."

"That is a pleasant assurance, but I fear we cannot go upon the strength of it, or your invitation," returned I, laughing.

"Besides," said Juliet, "you must know, Claude, I did not speak on my own account, for I never go to any gay parties, and should have declined this if I had been invited."

"That's all right then," replied Claude laughing, and then asked Luke, "Will you be there?"

"I think not," he replied, hesitating a little; "it is yet an open question. I met the Dean yesterday, and he said they were going to have a few young people to-morrow evening, and if I felt disposed to come over, Mrs. Elton would be glad to see me. He said nothing of *dancing*."

Luke emphasised the objectionable word and looked at Juliet, but the little Doctor took up his parable and said,

"Dear me! surely, my dear sir, you do not object to a little innocent hop amongst young people at home! Why, you know the prodigal was welcomed back with 'music and dancing;' we have just been enjoying one, why should we object to the other."

"But, my good sir, I am not going there in the character of the prodigal son," said Luke; "besides, we are not to take everything in its literal sense: it may mean by music and dancing only a certain form of rejoicing at that time and remote period."

"Besides," I interrupted, in fear of one of Luke's long expositions, "besides, we may be very sure the Dean will have nothing objectionable going on in his house, and no prodigal sons it is hoped to be received."

"No," said Claude quietly. "This dance, if it may be so called, is in honour of a daughter, not a son."

"Oh, to be sure!" exclaimed little Miss Jones. "I remember now—surely it is Miss Caroline's birthday."

"Yes," said Claude. "That event, I believe, is the cause of this unwonted piece of gaiety."

"Oh, Claude dear, then that is the reason you are going to-morrow—to keep Carrie Elton's birthday. I am so glad."

But Claude said no more.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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